Oral Communication Strategies Used by Iranian EFL Learners: Focus on Language Proficiency and Cultural Background

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Abstract
Oral Communication Strategies are conscious techniques that L2 interlocutors employ to overcome the communication breakdowns in the target language. Hence, they can help to promote the effectiveness of communication ability. However, it must be noted that many variables can influence the use of these strategies. The present study, therefore, aimed to investigate the role of language proficiency and cultural background variables on the use of oral communication strategies. After piloting the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory and Cultural Milieu and examining the reliability analysis as well as the construct validity, the questionnaires were administered to 320 participants majoring in the English language at B.A and M.A levels. Then, SPSS 18.0 computer program was used to analyze the collected data. Next, an interview was held to gain more information on the use of strategies by the Iranian EFL learners. The results of this inquiry revealed that there is no significant difference between learners at different language proficiency levels in terms of oral communication strategies use, while there is a significant difference between different cultural backgrounds in the use of OCSs. The findings of this research can be useful for developing the use of oral communication strategies among EFL learners, particularly with Persian and Turkish cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: oral communication strategies, language proficiency, cultural background, EFL learners, L2 interlocutors.

Introduction

Almost all EFL learners have experienced some communication difficulties during their speaking in the target language. Many researchers and teachers have attempted to find a way to help learners to overcome these problems. Many studies showed that the use of oral communication strategies (OCSs) can help language learners' not only in compensating the lack of linguistic knowledge in communication but also in facilitating communicative interaction (Bialystok, 1990; Dornyei, 1995; Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Nakatani & Goh, 2007; Poulisse, 1990; Tarone, 1977). However, oral communication strategies can be affected by many socio-psychological, and cultural factors.

One of the important factors that can influence the use of oral communication strategies is language proficiency. Many researchers have focused on the effect of language proficiency on the use of OCSs (Chen, 1990; Littlemore, 2003; Nakatain, 2006; Paribakht, 1985; Poulisse & Schils, 1989; Tarone, 1977). Some researchers recognized that high proficient learners use oral communication strategies more than low proficient learners (Bialystok, 1983; Kumaravadivelu, 1988; Prebianca, 2009). On the contrary, some researchers recognized that low proficient learners tended to use more oral communication strategies than high proficient learners (Chen, 1990; Nakatani, 2005; Poulisse & Schils, 1989). Despite extensive research in this area, results often

appear to conflict with each other. Additionally, some researchers tried to focus on the type of oral communication strategies used in each language proficiency level. It was recognized that learners with different language proficiency levels drew upon different oral communication strategies to solve their communication problems. (Chen, 1990; Paribakht, 1985). However, more studies need to address this issue.

Language and culture are tightly interrelated. Language is socio-culturally constructed and also gradually shaped based on the needs and demands of the context. Hence, culture is viewed as an interactive factor in language learning (Byram 1997; Kramsch 1993).Grainger (1997) stated that cultural background is as one of the interacting factors that may have impact on strategy use. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) pointed out that learners from certain nationalities prefer to employ certain strategies. In this line, Griffiths (2003) recognized that European learners used strategies more frequently than learners from other nationalities because of cultural ideals. Recently, Hsieh (2014) has mentioned that learners from different cultural background use oral communication strategies significantly differently. However, most of the pervious researchers have focused primarily on using oral communication strategies in broad cross-cultural comparison. There has been no research on how different subcultures in a specific context play a role in

Moreover, studies about the use of oral communication strategies in different contexts have resulted into the development of some OCSs classifications. Among them, Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) is regarded as a complete and comprehensive one by many researchers. It was developed by Nakatani (2006) in two parts. The first part involves strategies for coping with speaking problems and the second part deals with strategies for coping with listening problems. Eight factors for 32 speaking items and seven factors for 26 listening items were identified. Since the focus of this study is on the speaking part, the conceptual framework of this study concern with social affective, fluency-oriented, negotiation for meaning while speaking, accuracy-oriented, message reduction and alternation, nonverbal strategies while speaking, message abandonment, and attempt to think in English strategies.

In short, few studies have considered variables like language proficiency and cultural background in the use of oral communication strategies.

Literature Review
Many studies on oral communication strategies were primarily concerned with the language proficiency due to the fact that language proficiency is a potentially influential variable in the use of oral communication strategies by EFL learners. Some researchers showed that high proficient learners were able to use oral communication strategies more frequently and effectively than low proficient learners (Bialystok, 1990; Kumaravadivelu, 1988; Poulisse &Schils, 1989).Wharton (2000) recognized that low proficiency learners tended to use more OCSs than high proficient learners. It was argued that learners in low proficiency levels have limited linguistics knowledge, so they try to use more OCSs to compensate this shortage. In addition, Tuan (2001) indicated that high proficiency learners tend to use fewer OCSs. Instead, they employ OCSs more effectively than less proficient learners. It is worth noting that learners with a high language proficiency prefer to use certain OCSs. On the contrary, Li (2010) in the study of oral communication strategies used by English learners in Taiwan reported that the highly proficient learners employed OCSs more than other learners. Also, proficient learners preferred to use more social, negotiation for meaning, and accuracy-oriented strategies than others. Therefore, it was concluded that less proficient learners may not be fully equipped to use OCSs. Obviously, in the early level of learning process, they do not have the adequate L2

knowledge to tackle the use of OCSs. As learners develop their knowledge of the L2, they may subsequently learn how to use OCSs more effectively to overcome the communicative barriers (Prebianca, 2009). In this regard, Chen (1990) pointed out that "learners with different target language proficiency levels drew upon different sources of knowledge to solve their communication problems" (p.174). Paribakht's study (1985) showed that advanced learners used more oral communication strategies which were related to linguistic strategies like circumlocution while the intermediate learners appealed to adopt more contextual strategies as idiomatic transfer and transliteration. Nakatani (2006) identified that learners at a higher proficiency level relied more on social-affective, fluency maintaining and negotiation for meaning strategies when they came across speaking problems while the low proficiency learners used more message abandonment. Generally, studies have reported that low proficiency learners are more likely to use message abandonment, giving up on communicating a message (Chen, 2009; Wannaruk, 2003) or topic avoidance (Mei & Nathalang, 2010). On the other hand, high proficiency learners tend to use more social-affective, fluency-maintaining and negotiation-for-meaning strategies (Nakatani, 2006).

Cultural background is one of the interacting factors that likely impact on strategy use (Grainger, 1997).Despite the fact that culture is an affecting variable in the use of oral communication strategies, only a few studies have directly considered the interlocutors' cultural backgrounds in the use of oral communication strategies. For example, Paribakht (1985) noticed that Persian learners tried to use the translated L1 idioms and proverbs for some notions. It was identified that the OCS choices of some specific concepts appeared to be context or culture-bound. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) proposed that learners from certain nationalities preferred to employ some certain oral communication strategies more than others. In this line, Griffiths (2003) recognized that European learners used more frequently strategies than learners from other nationalities because of cultural ideals. Recently, Hsieh (2014) has examined the effect of cultural background and language proficiency on the use of oral communication strategies. In this study,176 participants from 21 countries were selected then they were divided into four cultural groups as South Asian, East Asian, European and North with three proficiency levels as novice-high, intermediate-low, and intermediate-high based on the English course they were attending. They were asked to complete the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory. The analysis of data revealed in the elementary level, all participants employed almost the same kind of OCSs due to the limited linguistic knowledge. Interestingly, the important result is that after learners' language developed to a certain level, they start to employ OCSs in different ways. At this level, the cultural background comes to play an efficient role in the use of OCSs. In the cultural considerations, the study showed that the North American group employed more social-affective and conversation maintenance strategies than the other cultural groups and the East Asian learners were found to use more word-oriented strategies than the other cultural groups. In conclusion, understanding of the relation between cultural background and the use oral communication strategies is still piecemeal in SLA research. Moreover, researchers have focused primarily on the study of oral communication strategies in broad cross-cultural comparison and failed to explore how subcultures in a specific country or context my affect the use of oral communication strategies by foreign language learners. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to pave the way for broadening the current knowledge about learners' use of oral communication strategies. To accomplish this objective, the following research questions were raised:

Q1. Is there any significant difference between Iranian EFL learners at different language proficiency levels (intermediate vs. advanced) in terms of oral communication strategy use?

Q2. Is there any significant difference between Iranian EFL learners from different cultural backgrounds (Persian vs. Turkish) in terms of oral communication strategy use?

Method

Participants

To conduct the present study, 320 participants, 160 from Tehran and 16o from Urmia were selected based on their availability and willingness. All of them were majoring in English language at B.A. or M.A. level.

Instruments

Proficiency Test

In this study, the participants' proficiency level was determined by means of the Oxford Placement Test (OPT). The OPT test consists of two parts as listening and grammar. Although one can claim that it is the written proficiency that OPT tests and not necessarily the oral proficiency, it should be mentioned that first of all checking the oral proficiency of the 320 participants of this study was not at all possible and practical. Second, because logically oral and written proficiency are related to each other and make the single construct of language proficiency, in many contexts especially where testing the speaking ability is not possible or practical, written proficiency is used instead though caution is applied to interpreting and generalizing the results. The use of paper-based TOEFL which lacks speaking test and is still common in some countries including Iran would be relevant evidence in this regard.

Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI)

Nakatani (2006) developed OCSI with two parts; strategies for coping with speaking problems and strategies for coping with listening problems. The speaking part consists of 32 items and each item is assessed on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. To check for validity factor analysis was used by the developer. The results showed eight factors in the speaking part as social affective, fluency-oriented, negotiation for meaning while speaking, accuracy oriented, message reduction and alteration, nonverbal strategies while speaking, message abandonment, and attempt to think in English. Also the internal consistency of speaking part using Cronbach's alpha turned out to be 0.86. Nevertheless, its reliability and validity were checked again in this study because some modifications were conducted to make the items suitable to the context of the present study the results will be explained in the pilot study.

Cultural Milieu Questionnaire

It was extracted from a devised questionnaire by Ryan (2009). The 6 items in this questionnaire were designed to assess the tendency of members of a cultural group to learn the English language. Its reliability and validity were examined through this study which will be reported in the pilot section.

Semi-Structured Interview

An interview was employed to extract information on the type of oral communication strategies used by the participants. The interview was face to face and semi-structured. The first part of the interview was about the demographic information of participants. The next part was concerned with the questions exclusively about the oral communication strategies. And then, participants were asked to express their ideas about the importance of learning the English language in their cultural groups.

Pilot Study

Initially, three experts were asked to examine OCSI and cultural milieu questionnaire. In their opinions, there was no problem. Afterward, the preliminary version of the questionnaires were piloted with 10 university English major students. After completing the questionnaires, they were asked to report any difficulties they had encountered in understanding and answering the items. Consequently, some words were modified and revised in some items. Once more, the experts were asked to comment on the final version of the questionnaires in order to come up with a more valid version. After they approved the modified version, OCSI and cultural Milieu questionnaire were piloted with 278 students who were similar to the participants in the main study. Then, for reliability analysis, Cronbach alpha was employed. And also the construct validity of the questionnaires was investigated by Principal Component Analysis (PCA) as a variant of factor analysis. The results are presented for each questionnaire in the following sections.

Reliability Analysis of OCSI

To examine the reliability of OCSI, alpha as a measure of internal consistency was used. The results indicate that the OCSI has a relatively medium internal consistency reliability (alpha = .52) which could not be considered very acceptable; however, further item analysis, presented below, show that this level of alpha could be considered acceptable. After the calculation of alpha, the items of the OCSI were analyzed individually to see to what extent each item was well functioning. To do so, the descriptive statistics of the OCSI and its items were calculated. Afterwards, the item total-total statistics were computed for each item in Table 1. The corrected item-total correlations as an index of item discrimination indicate the relationship between the item performance of each individual and its performance on the whole test. Moreover, the last column in Table 1 shows whether the removal of a low discriminating item will result in a significantly higher Cronbach alpha or not. Evidently, the removal of no item increases the Cronbach alpha of the test noticeably. In sum, these results indicate that the OCSI is of acceptable internal consistency reliability and the items in general are functioning well.

Table 1. *Item-Total Statistics of OCSI*

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
ITEM01	110.8777	43.176	-.027	.549
ITEM02	109.9676	42.732	.115	.521
ITEM03	109.8022	42.968	.138	.519
ITEM04	111.3561	41.472	.106	.524
ITEM05	111.3669	42.045	.081	.527
ITEM06	111.3561	41.465	.145	.517
ITEM07	109.7878	43.164	.013	.536
ITEM08	109.8381	41.761	.192	.512

ITEM09	109.6942	42.459	.211	.513
ITEM10	110.7662	41.840	.077	.529
ITEM11	109.8094	42.039	.185	.513
ITEM12	109.8705	40.388	.269	.499
ITEM13	109.9856	40.585	.300	.498
ITEM14	109.6727	40.892	.305	.499
ITEM15	110.0468	40.074	.313	.494
ITEM16	109.8561	40.752	.356	.495
ITEM17	110.0108	40.877	.248	.503
ITEM18	109.7122	42.300	.297	.509
ITEM19	109.9640	40.908	.318	.498
ITEM20	109.8885	40.179	.325	.494
ITEM21	110.1691	39.578	.335	.489
ITEM22	110.1115	41.312	.246	.505
ITEM23	110.4317	41.517	.152	.516
ITEM24	112.0791	44.073	-.052	.542
ITEM25	109.9029	44.016	-.017	.532
ITEM26	110.4353	41.424	.148	.517
ITEM27	109.9964	43.693	.027	.528
ITEM28	109.8633	43.490	.071	.525
ITEM29	109.6906	43.998	-.001	.529
ITEM30	109.3273	43.174	.061	.526
ITEM31	111.3094	44.337	-.091	.556
ITEM32	111.5899	44.633	-.114	.562

Validity Analysis of OCSI

In this study, PCA as a variant of factor analysis was employed to investigate the factor structure of OCSI. Since it was already validated and its factor structure was examined by Nakatani (2006), the factor analysis in the present study was run to see whether the same factor structure (i.e. 8 factors) would be achieved based on the data of the present study (n = 278).Table 2 shows statistics on the sampling adequacy for the analysis (KMO = .72) which is even larger than the completely acceptable (KMO > .5) according to Field (2009). Bartlett's test of sphericity [$\chi^2(496) = 2484.1$, p< .001] was found significant indicating large enough correlations between items for PCA; therefore, this sample can be considered adequate for running PCA.

Table 2. *KMO and Bartlett's Test of OCSI*

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.722
	Approx. Chi-Square	2484.109
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Df	496
	Sig.	.000

The next step in PCA is to investigate the number of factors required to be retained in the factor analysis. To do so, the number of factors required to be extracted was set to 8 to see whether the same number of factors extracted in the study by Nakatani (2006) would be observed. Nakatani (2006) employed a minimum-eigenvalue criterion of 1.0 (Kaiser's criterion), followed by varimax rotation. Moreover, Kaiser's criterion was used because this method is

particularly suitable for principal components design. Varimax rotation was also employed to understand and interpret factors more easily. The total percentage of variance accounted for by these eight factors was 58.0% in Nakatani's (2006) study. In the present study too, according to Table 6, the total percentage of variance accounted for by the eight extracted factors was 54.94%, which is close to Nakatani's percentage. This percentage shows that the first eight factors explain 54.94 % of the variance which is almost more than half of the whole variance. In order to make sure whether this number of factors is correct to be retained, parallel analysis was run comparing the size of the eigenvalues with those obtained from a randomly generated data set of the same size. To do so, Monte Carlo PCA for Parallel Analysis software (Watkins, 2000) was employed. By setting the number of replications to 100, the program generated 100 sets of random data of the same size (32 items × 278 cases). Consequently, the average criterion eigenvalues for these 100 randomly generated samples were computed in Table3. As a rule, the eigenvalues obtained in SPSS with the corresponding value from the random results generated by parallel analysis should be compared. If the SPSS value is larger than the criterion value from parallel analysis, the factor is retained; if it is less, then the factor is rejected and should be excluded. As the last three columns in Table 3 indicate, the first seven factors should be retained since the criterion eigenvalues are smaller than the actual eigenvalues. It is only the eighth factor which has a criterion value larger than the corresponding actual value. With regard to the very minimal difference between the eigenvalues for the eighth factor (i.e. by only a difference of .03) and the sample size employed in this study, it seems that the eighth factor extracted initially could be retained. Therefore, the factor analysis was continued in order to see to what extent these 8 extracted factors correspond with the eight factors extracted in Nakatani's (2006) study in terms of the loadings on the items. However, some differences existed. Through content analysis, it became evident that the results by Nakatani with a larger sample was more logical.

Table 3. *Total Variance Explained of OCSI*

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Total (actual eigenvalues)	Criterion eigenvalues from parallel analysis	Decision
	Total (actual eigenvalues)	% of Variance	Cumulative %			
1	4.841	15.128	15.128	4.841	1.6942	Accepted
2	2.912	9.100	24.228	2.912	1.6019	Accepted
3	2.376	7.424	31.652	2.376	1.5360	Accepted
4	1.753	5.478	37.129	1.753	1.4733	Accepted
5	1.606	5.019	42.148	1.606	1.4181	Accepted
6	1.517	4.741	46.889	1.517	1.3701	Accepted
7	1.329	4.154	51.044	1.329	1.3236	Accepted
8	1.248	3.900	54.944	1.248	1.2810	Rejected
9	1.090	3.407	58.351			
10	1.071	3.348	61.700			
11	1.026	3.206	64.906			
12	.970	3.032	67.938			
13	.879	2.746	70.684			
14	.834	2.606	73.290			
15	.788	2.462	75.752			
16	.743	2.322	78.074			

17	.716	2.236	80.310
18	.696	2.176	82.486
19	.613	1.917	84.403
20	.549	1.716	86.119
21	.525	1.639	87.758
22	.481	1.505	89.263
23	.458	1.430	90.693
24	.435	1.360	92.053
25	.410	1.283	93.336
26	.394	1.231	94.567
27	.375	1.172	95.738
28	.334	1.044	96.782
29	.295	.921	97.704
30	.269	.840	98.544
31	.254	.793	99.336
32	.212	.664	100.000

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Reliability Analysis of Culture Milieu Questionnaire

The results of reliability statistics indicated that the Culture milieu questionnaire has a high reliability (alpha = .87). After the calculation of alpha, the items of the Culture milieu questionnaire were analyzed individually to see to what extent each item were well functioning. To do so, the descriptive statistics of the Culture milieu questionnaire in Table 4 and its items individually and as a whole were calculated in Table 5.

Table 4.*Item Statistics of Culture Milieu Questionnaire*

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
ITEM 1	2.0108	.70318	278
ITEM 2	1.9820	.63845	278
ITEM 3	2.0540	.75091	278
ITEM 4	1.9712	.65756	278
ITEM 5	1.9173	.73366	278
ITEM 6	1.8381	.82758	278

Table 5. *Scale Statistics of Culture Milieu Questionnaire*

Mean	Variance	Std. Deviation	N of Items
11.7734	11.504	3.39182	6

Afterwards, the item total-total statistics were computed for each item in Table 6. The last column in Table 6 shows whether the removal of a low discriminating item is going to result in a significantly higher Cronbach alpha or not. Evidently, the great majority of the values are larger than .3 which indicates that the items are discriminating well between high and low scorers on the whole questionnaire. Moreover, the removal of the few low discriminating items is not going to increase the Cronbach alpha. In sum, these results indicate that the Culture milieu

questionnaire is of acceptable internal consistency reliability and the items in general are functioning well.

Table 6. *Item-Total Statistics of Culture Milieu Questionnaire*

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
ITEM 1	9.7626	8.535	.602	.865
ITEM 2	9.7914	8.613	.663	.856
ITEM 3	9.7194	7.885	.725	.845
ITEM 4	9.8022	8.210	.760	.841
ITEM 5	9.8561	7.712	.799	.831
ITEM 6	9.9353	8.184	.557	.878

 Validity Analysis of Culture Milieu Questionnaire

Since no previous study on the factor structure of Culture milieu questionnaire was available in the literature, and this questionnaire was assumed to have no subscales, hence unidimensional, factor analysis was run to explore the underlying factor structure of the scale to see whether a unidimensional scale with one main factor would be achieved or not. The first PCA output table is the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure in Table 7 on the sampling adequacy for the analysis (KMO = .818) which is acceptable according to Field (2009). Bartlett's test of sphericity [χ^2 (15) = 935.894, p< .001] was found significant indicating large enough correlations between items for PCA; therefore, this sample can be considered adequate for running PCA.

Table 7. *KMO and Bartlett's Test of Culture Milieu Questionnaire*

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.818
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	935.894
	df	15
	Sig.	.000

The next step in PCA is to investigate the number of factors required to be retained in the factor analysis. To do so, scree plot was checked (Figure 1). Based on Figure 1, it seems that the point of inflexion is on the second factor; therefore, one factor is retained; however, since factor analysis cannot be done by extracting only one factor, two factors were extracted to make comparison between the contributions of the primary factor and the secondary factor.
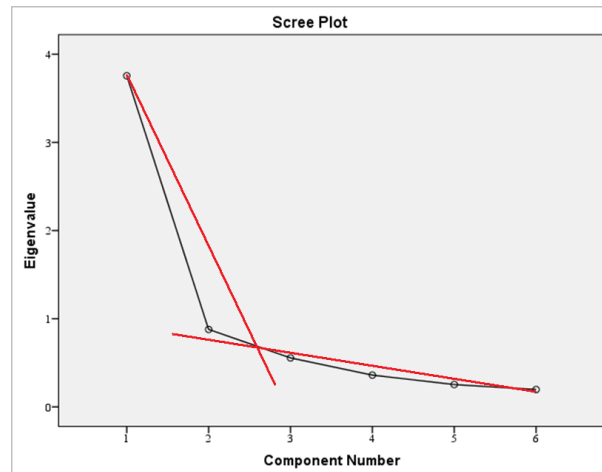
Figure 1. *Scree plot of Culture Milieu factor*

Table 8. *Total Variance Explained by Culture Milieu Questionnaire*

Component	Initial Eigenvalues					
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total (actual eigenvalues)	Criterion eigenvalues from parallel analysis	Decision
1	3.093	51.544	51.544	3.093	1.1983	Accepted
2	.991	16.522	68.066	.991	1.0968	Rejected
3	.797	13.275	81.341			
4	.461	7.678	89.019			
5	.386	6.436	95.455			
6	.273	4.545	100.000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

According to Table 8 above, the first main factor alone explains 51.54 % of the variance which is almost one third of the whole variance. In order to make sure whether this number of factors is correct to be retained, parallel analysis was run comparing the size of the eigenvalues with those obtained from a randomly generated data set of the same size. By setting the number of replications to 100, the program generated 100 sets of random data of the same size (6 items × 278 cases). Consequently, the average criterion eigenvalues for these 100 randomly generated samples were computed (Table 8). As the last three columns in Table 9indicate, the first factor should be retained since the criterion eigenvalue is smaller than the actual eigenvalues. With regard to these findings, it seems that the first factor extracted initially could be retained. Therefore, the factor analysis was continued with rotation. Table 9 presents the two factor loadings after varimax rotation. Since all of the items have loaded on the first factor, it could be concluded that this questionnaire is of one dominant dimension, hence a unidimensional scale. In other words, all of the items of this scale tap the Culture milieu.

Table 9. *Rotated Component Matrix[a] of Culture Milieu Questionnaire*

Component

	1	2
ITEM 5	.869	
ITEM 4	.849	
ITEM 3	.832	
ITEM 2	.777	-.479
ITEM 1	.725	
ITEM 6	.678	.609

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
 Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.
Rotation converged in 3 iterations.

Procedure

First, 320 participants from two cities of Iran, Tehran and Urmia, were selected. Then, Oxford Placement Test (OPT) as a language proficiency test was administered. According to OPT criterion, participants of Tehran as Persian cultural background group and Urmia as Turkish cultural background group were divided into intermediate and advanced language proficiency levels. Then three experts were asked to examine the questionnaires. After they evaluated and assured the validity of the questionnaires, the preliminary version of the questionnaires were piloted among 10 university English major students. On the basis of their responses, some items and words were modified or reworded since some participants had difficulty in comprehending them.

Once more the evaluated questionnaires were piloted with 278 students who were similar to the participants in the main study. Afterward, the reliability analysis, Cronbach alpha and item discrimination index were examined. Also, the construct validity of the questionnaires was investigated by Principal Component Analysis (PCA) as a variant of factor analysis. At last, the final version of the questionnaires wase administered to the 320 participants. Meanwhile, the participants were informed of the purpose and directions of the questionnaires. After collecting the data, SPSS 18.0 computer program was used to analyze them. Next, an interview was held to gain more information. In doing this, 32 interviewees were selected randomly. The initial part of the interview was about the demographic information then the questions about the oral communication strategies, particularly focused on the types of communication strategies that learners tend to use and in the last part of interview, participants were asked to answer cultural questions. Concurrently, the interviews were recorded for the transcription and analysis. Also, the participants were assured that their answers would be used only for research purposes.

Results

Statistical Results

The Use of OCSs among Iranian EFL Learners at Different Proficiency Levels

In order to investigate the answer to the first research question, the participants of the study were divided into two intermediate and advanced groups based on their OPT scores. According to OPT criterion, 320 students who obtained range scores of intermediate and advanced levels were accepted as the participants of this study. Table 10 presents the descriptive statistics of these two groups. The mean OPT score of the intermediate group is 56.64, and the mean of the advanced group is 81.37.

Table 10. *Descriptive Statistics of Intermediate and Advanced Groups on OPT*

Level		N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Std. Error	Kurtosis	Std. Error
Intermediate	OPT	160	50.00	66.00	56.6438	4.82309	.228	.192	-1.183	.381
	Valid N (listwise)	160								
Advanced	OPT	160	75.00	91.00	81.3750	5.08265	.248	.192	-1.378	.381
	Valid N (listwise)	160								

After determining the proficiency levels groups, the oral communication strategies (OCSI) scores of the students in the two proficiency levels were computed based on OCSI, and Table 11 presents the descriptive statistics. Since the investigation of this research question required a comparison of OCSI means of the two proficiency groups, initially the normality of the data of the two proficiency groups was checked by computing the skewness and kurtosis ratios from the descriptive statistics in Table 11. Since the skewness and kurtosis ratios of the data were beyond $\pm$ 1.96, the data were significantly deviant from normal. Moreover, the normality tests results in Table 12 indicated that the data were significantly deviant from normal ($p < .05$).

Table 11. *Descriptive Statistics of Intermediate and Advanced Groups on OCSI*

Level		N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Std. Error	Kurtosis	Std. Error
Intermediate	OCSI	160	86.00	129.00	110.3500	10.61102	-.704	.192	-.243	.381
	Valid N (listwise)	160								
Advanced	OCSI	160	90.00	121.00	110.3500	5.94122	-1.308	.192	2.045	.381
	Valid N (listwise)	160								

Moreover, the normality tests results in Table12 indicated that the data were significantly deviant from normal ($p < .05$).

Table 12. *Tests of Normality of Intermediate and Advanced Groups on OCSI*

	Language Level	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
OCSI	Intermediate	.144	160	.000	.932	160	.000
	Advanced	.121	160	.000	.895	160	.000

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Finally, the histograms of the data in Figure 2 demonstrated that the data were skewed. As a result non-parametric Mann Whitney test was run to compare the two proficiency groups in terms of their OCS mean scores.
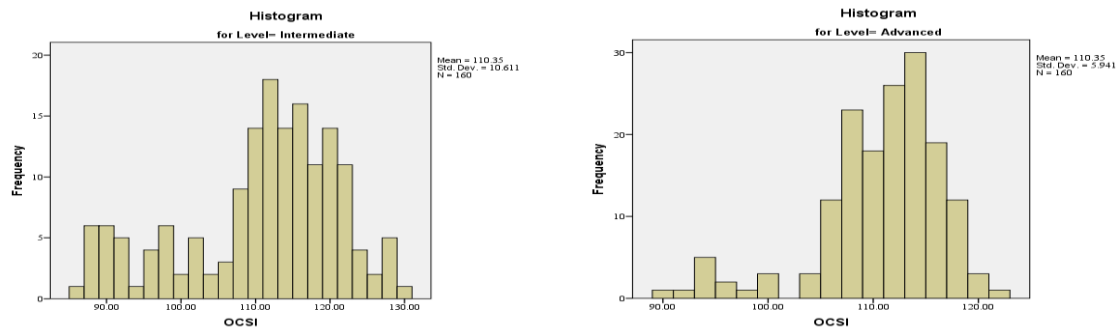

Figure 2. *Histograms of Intermediate and Advanced Language Level in OCSI*

Since Mann Whitney test is a non-parametric test, it bases the comparison of the two groups based on mean ranks rather than mean. Table 13 presents the mean ranks of the two proficiency groups in terms of their OCS scores. Evidently, the intermediate group is of higher mean rank; however, this difference needs to be checked for statistical significance.

Table 13. *Ranks of Intermediate and Advanced Groups in OCSI*

	Level	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
	Intermediate	160	169.06	27050.00
OCSI	Advanced	160	151.94	24310.00
	Total	320		

The results of Mann Whitney test in Table 14 indicate that there is no significant difference between the two proficiency groups in terms of their OCS scores; $Z = -1.65$, $p > .05$.

Table 14. *Mann-Whitney U Test Statistics[a] of Intermediate and Advanced Groups in OCSI*

	OCSI
Mann-Whitney U	11430.000
Z	-1.658
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.097

a. Grouping Variable: Level

In other words, there is no significant difference between Iranian EFL learners at different language proficiency levels (intermediate vs. advanced) in terms of oral communication strategy use.

The Use of OCSs among the Iranian EFL Learners at Different Cultural Backgrounds

In order to investigate the answer to the second question, the participants of the study were divided into two cultural background groups (i.e. Turkish & Persian). Then, the oral communication strategies (OCS) scores of the students in the two cultural background groups were computed based on OCSI, and the descriptive statistics were calculated as shown in Table 15.

Table 15. *Descriptive Statistics of two Cultural Background Groups*

Cultural Background Groups		N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Std. Error	Kurtosis	Std. Error
Persian	OCS	160	86.00	129.00	109.51	88.024	-.948	.192	.912	.381
	Valid N (listwise)	160								
Turkish	OCS	160	87.00	128.00	111.18	19.061	-.900	.192	.734	.381
	Valid N (listwise)	160								

Since the investigation of this research question required a comparison of OCS means of the two cultural background groups, initially the normality of the data of the two cultural background groups was checked by computing the skewness and kurtosis ratios from the descriptive statistics in Table 16. Since the skewness and kurtosis ratios of the data were beyond ± 1.96, the data were significantly deviant from normal. Moreover, the normality tests results in Table 16 indicated that the data were significantly deviant from normal (p < .05).

Table 16. *Tests of Normality of two Cultural Background Groups*

	Cultural background	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
OCSI	Persian	.133	160	.000	.924	160	.000
	Turkish	.163	160	.000	.923	160	.000

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Finally, the histograms of the data in Figure 3 demonstrated that the data were skewed. As a result non-parametric Mann Whitney test was run to compare the two cultural background groups in terms of their OCS mean scores.
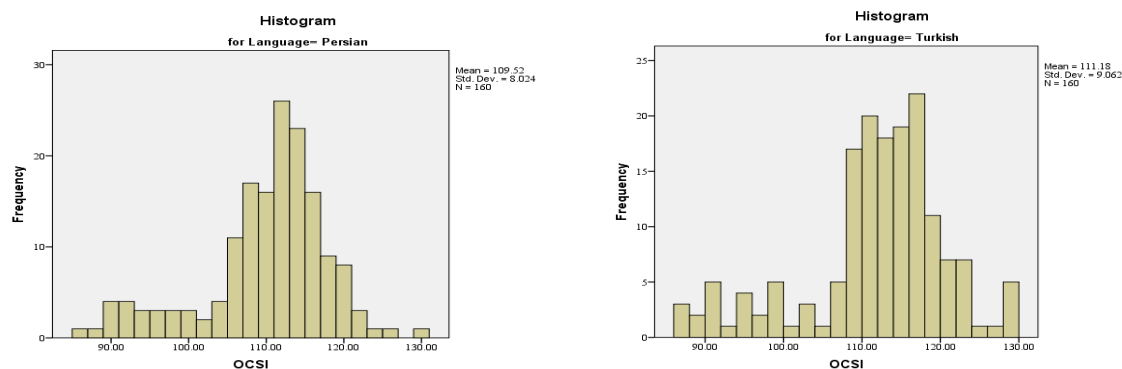
Figure 3. *Histograms of Persian and Turkish Cultural Background in OCSI*

Since Mann Whitney test is a non-parametric test, it bases the comparison of the two groups based on mean ranks rather than mean. Table 17 presents the mean ranks of the two cultural background groups in terms of their OCS scores.

Table 17. *Ranks of Two Cultural Background in OCSI*

	Cultural background Groups	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
	Persian	160	148.22	23714.50
OCSI	Turkish	160	172.78	27645.50
	Total	320		

Evidently, the Turkish group is of higher mean rank; however, this difference needs to be checked for statistical significance. The results of Mann Whitney test in Table 18 indicate that there is a significant difference between the two cultural background groups in terms of their OCS scores; Z = -2.37, p < .05.

Table 18. *Mann-Whitney U Test Statistics[a] of Two Cultural Background in OCSI*

	OCSI
Mann-Whitney U	10834.500
Z	-2.378
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.017

a. Grouping Variable: cultural background groups

In other words, there is a significant difference between Iranian EFL learners from different cultural backgrounds (Persian vs. Turkish) in terms of oral communication strategy use. Specifically, the Turkish background students make significantly higher use of oral communication strategies.

Interview Results

The interview was conducted in order to overcome the shortcomings of the questionnaires. Also, it was believed that the interview could provide complementary information about the use of oral communication strategies regarding language proficiency and cultural milieu factors.

The recorded interviews were transcribed and classified based on Nakatani's oral communication strategies inventory as a conceptual framework of this Study with eight factors as social affective, fluency-oriented, negotiation for meaning while speaking, accuracy-oriented, message reduction, and non-verbal strategies while speaking, message abandonment, and attempt to think in English.

In the first part of interview, participants in both intermediate and advanced groups were asked to answer the following questions:
What do you do to help you maintain a conversation?
What do you do when you don't know how to say something?
What do you do when you can't recall a word or a phrase?
Do you tend to use OCSs in target language communication?
Do you think the use of OCSs can facilitate your communication in L2?
Which OCSs do you prefer to use more?

All advanced interviewees mentioned that they preferred to use oral communication strategies. They thought that use of oral communication strategies can be very useful and learning

how to use oral communication strategies is vital for all language learners especially when they face communication problems. The following excerpts from their comments verify this point.

"I prefer to use OCSs in the target language communication because I really think that the use of OCSs can be very useful. I remembered when I passed some English courses, I recognized that learning just language knowledge cannot be enough to communicate in English. Therefore, employing OCSs in communication can be very effective for me."
"I tend to use OCSs when I communicate in English. I think they have a power to enhance communication abilities. When I took part in IELTS exam. My teacher taught me how to use OCSs in speaking. And really it worked on speaking module of IELTs exam for me. After that I have tried to use them."

Moreover, intermediate participants indicated that they tried to use OCSs in encountering oral communication problems. Also, they believed that OCSs can compensate for their shortcoming of language knowledge. They mentioned that:
"I try to use oral communication strategies when I speak in English. In my opinion, it is essential to know how to use OCSs. They are absolutely useful. So, I like to learn how to use them more efficiently."
"When I travelled to a foreign country, for the first time I noticed the role of OCSs in the maintaining oral communication. I realized how people use them even in daily conversations. After that I try to use them for effective communication."

Considering the participants' comments concerning the use OCSs as determined through the interview, it was concluded that both intermediate and advanced groups tended to use OCSs. This is in line with the statistical results related to the first research question. The interview data also provided support for the fact that there is no significant difference between intermediate and advanced EFL learners in terms of the use of communication strategies.

However, analyzing the transcribed data showed that there was a tendency in the use of different types of OCSs by the intermediate and advanced groups. While participants in the intermediate group liked to use more reduction strategies and message abandonment strategies, participants in the advanced group tended to use more social-affective, fluency-maintaining, and negotiation for meaning strategies. For example, some participants in intermediate language levels expressed:

"When I can't communicate well, I try to ask other people to help."
"I like to reduce the message and use simple expressions."
"I like to use words which are familiar to me."
"I ask other people to help when I can't communicate well."

On the other hand, the advanced learners mentioned:

"I try to encourage myself to express what I want to say."
"I try to pay attention to pronunciation and intonation."
"While speaking, I try to pay attention to the listener's reaction to my speech."
"I try to pay attention to grammar and word order during conversation."
"I try to talk like a native speaker."

The last part of interview focused on cultural background. Initially, participants in Turkish and Persian groups were asked to respond to the following cultural background questions:

1. Do your parents encourage you to study English?
2. Do people around you think that it is a good thing to learn the English Language?
3. Are there any people around you who tend to think that learning English is a waste of time?
4. What is your idea of learning English?
5. Do you think it is an important school subject?

Analysis of the interview data indicated that Persian participants thought that learning English was necessary for everybody in all the fields. On the contrary, the Turkish thought it was good to know English but it was not necessary for everybody. Moreover, Persians reported that most of their parents thought that learning English is necessary but not all of them encouraged them to study it directly. On the other hand, the Turkish reported they were encouraged to learn English more by friends than parents. Besides, Persians mentioned that learning English was important for all people living around them because English was considered as the international language. Hence, it had to be known and understood. In contrast, Turkish reported that people thought that learning English was necessary just for the young generation, since English language was considered as an academic language and, therefore, by knowing it, technology could be employed in the best way.

Then, the interviewees' tendency to use OCSs of in Persian and Turkish groups was investigated. The interview results showed that Turkish participants tended to use more OCSs than Persian participants. This finding is concurrent with the statistical result of the second research question. Furthermore, the interview in terms of cultural differences showed that

Turkish had the tendency to use almost all OCSs. They were interested in using almost all OCSs and they were less willing to take risks and speak out without using OCSs. In contrast, Persian participants preferred to use just some OCSs. They preferred to encourage themselves to take risks and to enjoy the conversation.

A Persian interviewee expressed that:

"When I speak in English with a foreigner. First of all, I try to communicate in a natural way. And I try to express my opinions and ideas directly. Then if I have some troubles to convey meanings, I tend to use some strategies like fillers, gestures, and facial expressions."

And a Turkish interviewee answered that:

"When I speak in English. I usually focus on the informative function of language. I try to use all oral communication strategies that I already know. I think through employing OCSs I can communicate with an interlocutor in the best way and less communication breakdowns will occur if I use these strategies."

Then participants in each group were asked about the oral communication strategies they prefer to use more. Persians mentioned that they tended to use more fluency-oriented strategies and nonverbal strategies.

"When I communicate in English more anything, I pay attention to my pronunciation and intonation."

"When I am talking in English, I try to use nonverbal strategies; like eye contact, gestures. I think they can be helpful in conveying meaning."

However, Turkish participants expressed that their favorite OCSs are accuracy-oriented strategies and that they attempt to think of English strategies.

"In communication in English, I try to pay attention to my grammatical and word choice."
"While speaking, I always try to construct the English sentence according to the appropriateness of contexts."

Overall, analysis of the interview data revealed that there is a difference between Iranian EFL learners from different cultural backgrounds (Persian vs. Turkish) in terms of oral communication strategy use. Turkish participants tended to use almost all types of OCSs and they were less willing to take risks and speak out without using OCSs. Furthermore, their favorite strategies are accuracy-oriented strategies. While participants with Persian background, however, tended to encourage themselves to take risks and to enjoy the conversation and use their favorite OCSs like fluency-oriented strategies and nonverbal strategies.

Discussion

Oral communication strategies are defined as all attempts between interlocutors to manipulate the limited linguistic system in order to maintain the stream of oral communication (Corder, 1983; Tarone, 1977). Accordingly, many researchers have indicated that OCSs are useful tools for learners to fill the gap between their communicative needs and the limited linguistic knowledge resources (Bialystok, 1990; Canale & Swain, 1980; Kasper & Kellerman, 1996; Nakatani & Goh, 2007).The point is that language proficiency is a potentially influential variable in the use of oral communication strategies by EFL learners (Chen, 1990; Littlemore, 2003; Nakatain, 2006 ; Paribakht, 1985; Poulisse & Schils, 1989).For this reason, the first objective of this inquiry was to recognize whether any significant difference exists between intermediate and advanced learners in terms of oral communication strategy use in the context of Iran.

Statistically analyzing the gathered data through OCSI between intermediate and advanced groups revealed that there is no significant difference between Iranian EFL learners at different language proficiency levels in terms of oral communication strategy use. Also the results of the interviews analysis provided evidence that there is no difference between participants of both groups in the use of OCSs. This result is in line with Ansarin (2003) that pointed out language proficiency levels do not affect overall strategy use in Iranian EFL learners. However, Nakatani, Makki, and Bradley (2012) have recognized that the use of oral communication strategies is different according to the language proficiency levels. In particular, the advanced learners tend to use oral communication strategies more than other levels. Similarly, Yaman (2013) has identified the significant difference between intermediate and advanced EFL learners in terms of the use of communication strategies.

In order to provide a more comprehensible picture about the intermediate and advanced learners' use of OCSs, it was decided to focus on the type of OCSs used in each language proficiency through the interview. In this way, analysis of the interview data revealed that advanced participants tended to use more social-affective strategies*; I try to relax when I feel anxious, I try to enjoy the conversation, I try to give a good impression to the listener*, fluency-oriented strategies*; I pay attention to the conversational flow*, *I change my way of saying things according to the context* and negotiation for meaning strategies*; I make comprehension checks to ensure the listener understands what I want to say*. However, intermediate participants preferred to use more reduction strategies: *I reduce the message and use simple expressions* and message abandonment strategies as *I leave a message unfinished because of some language difficulty*.

These findings are fairly consistent with those reported in previous studies that have recognized that low proficiency learners are more likely to use message abandonment strategies,(Chen, 2009; Nakatani, 2006 ;Wannaruk, 2003) and message reduction strategies (Mei & Nathalang, 2010). On the other hand, the advanced learners tend to use more social-affective, fluency-maintaining and negotiation for meaning strategies (Nakatani, 2006).

It can be discussed that the tendency of intermediate language learners to use these types of OCSs may be rooted in the level of their language proficiency. Their level of language is not strong enough to manipulate the language; therefore, they prefer to use those OCSs which require less language knowledge like message abandonment and message reduction strategies. On the contrary, advanced learners tend to use those oral communication strategies that may need higher levels of proficiency and may involve language manipulation like social affective strategies and negotiation for meaning strategies.

As Oxford (1996) indicated that the cultural background potentially can affect the strategy choice. It must be mentioned that Paribakht (1985) identified that Persian learners tried to use the translated L1 idioms and proverbs for some notions. It was proposed that the OCSs choices of some specific concepts appeared to be context or culture-bound. To this extent, this study focused on the difference between Iranian EFL learners from two different cultural backgrounds (Persian vs. Turkish) in terms of oral communication strategy use. The analysis of gathered data by the Mann Whitney test in statistical part indicated that there is a significant difference between the two cultural background groups in terms of their OCS use; specifically, the Turkish background learners made significantly higher use of oral communication strategies. In this regard, Grainger (1997) insisted that cultural background is one of the interacting factors that likely has impact on strategy use. More recently, Hsieh (2014) has pointed out that cultural background comes to play an efficient role in the use of OCSs after learners' language is developed to a certain level. That means language learners tend to employ OCSs in different ways because of the cultural background effects. Furthermore, the interview results showed that Turkish learners tended to use

almost all types of OCSs. It mentioned that they were less willing to take risks and speak out without using OCSs. On the other hand, Persian learners preferred to use some OCSs. It was found that they tended to use more fluency-oriented strategies; *I pay attention to my rhythm and intonation, I pay attention to my pronunciation* and nonverbal strategies; *I try to make eye contact when I am talking; I use gestures and facial expressions if I can't communicate how to express myself.* This result proved the claim that learners from certain cultural background prefer to employ certain strategies more than others (Bedell & Oxford, 1996; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

Conclusion

Many researchers in SLA have shown that oral communication strategies have the potential to help language learners to communicate efficiently in the target language (Dornyei & Scott, 1997; Littlemore, 2003; Marco, 2006; Nakatani, 2010). However, many factors might influence the use of oral communication strategies. Therefore, this study was attempted to examine the role of language proficiency and cultural background in the use of oral communication strategies.

Statistically, it showed that there is no significant difference between Iranian EFL learners at different language proficiency levels in terms of oral communication strategy use. And through the interview, it revealed that intermediate participants liked to use more reduction strategies and message abandonment strategies while advanced participants tended to use more social-affective, fluency-maintaining, and negotiation for meaning strategies. It can be concluded that Iranian EFL learners tend to use oral communication strategies in all language proficiency levels. In addition, this inquiry showed that Turkish background learners make significantly higher use of oral communication strategies than Persian background learners. Therefore, researchers and teachers must be conscious that the cultural background is an important factor in the use of oral communication strategies.

The findings of this research can be employed by educators and teachers for developing the use of oral communication strategies among Iranian EFL learners, particularly with Persian and Turkish cultural background.

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