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Research Article

Impact of Proficiency Level and Formal Instruction on Language Learners' Behaviours of Oral Communication Strategies in Online Learning Environments

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Abstract:

Considering the transition of more classes to online education after COVID-19, understanding learners' behaviours is crucial for teachers to manage interactions in online learning environments (OLEs). This quantitative study investigates which Oral Communication Strategies (OCS) language learners use in OLE and examines the impact of proficiency level and length of formal instruction on OCS use. Data were collected from 93 tertiary-level foreign-language learners by administering Nakatani's (2006) adapted Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI). The SPSS analyses reveal that language learners use 'negotiation for meaning' most frequently and 'message abandonment' least frequently in the OLE. While further analyses found no difference in OCS use across proficiency levels, they revealed a significant correlation between the length of formal English instruction and affective OCS use. Moreover, the length of formal instruction predicts foreign language learners' use of planning and organising strategies, which is a novel finding in the field. These empirical insights yield practical implications by informing language teachers' in-the-moment decision-making behaviours during online language classes.

Keywords: Oral communication strategies (OCS), Interactional setting, Proficiency level, Formal instruction, Online learning environments (OLE), EFL

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INTRODUCTION

Obviously, the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated changes in the nature of language lessons and routines by shifting face-to-face communication to synchronous meetings. However, the need for learner-teacher and learner-learner interaction is not distinct from that in conventional settings. Language learners are still required to express themselves in the target language through participation in various activities, answering and asking questions to their teacher or friends and discussing their needs or even technical issues, all of which are part of their language acquisition process. Therefore, learners' OCS use might have changed direction, yet has certainly not disappeared completely.

OCS have attracted the attention of many researchers, particularly since Canale and Swain (1980) redefined communicative competence. More precisely, many studies have investigated the perceived use of OCS (Pawlak, 2015), the actual implementation in class (Ibrahimova, 2017; Uztosun & Erten, 2014), and its teachability (Nakatani, 2005). Moreover, various factors that impact learners' use of OCS, such as gender (Yaman et al., 2013), proficiency level (Hsieh, 2014), willingness to communicate (Arpacı-Somuncu, 2016), learner autonomy (Gökgöz, 2008), and self-efficacy (Meigouni & Shirkhani, 2020), have provided valuable insights into OCS use in English as a foreign language (EFL) settings. However, all were conducted in face-to-face, brick-and-mortar classrooms, where communication is immediate. Moreover, the link between proficiency level and OCS remains inconclusive, and we have limited knowledge about the potential impact of formal English instruction on EFL learners' use of OCS.

Considering these gaps in the literature and the relevance of this issue in any type of course offered online, the current study aims to investigate EFL learners' OCS use in OLE and how it is impacted by proficiency level and length of formal instruction. Accordingly, this study is guided by three research questions:

1. What OCS are used by EFL learners in OLE?

2. How does EFL learners' proficiency level impact their OCS use in OLE?

3. How does EFL learners' length of formal English instruction impact their OCS use in OLE?

This study is particularly significant and timely because the number of OCS studies conducted in OLE is limited. Given that a substantially greater number of courses are delivered online worldwide, the results of this study will enhance all teachers' and teacher educators' understanding of learners' communication behaviours in OLE, regardless of their subjects.

Theoretical Underpinnings of OCS

Proper OCS literature dates back to 1972, when Selinker broadly defined them as the strategies learners employ by simplifying their interlanguage. At that time, they were not

called OCS, but were referred to, in general, as 'second-language learning strategies'. However, it was not until Canale and Swain (1980) that OCS became a major focus of research. Primarily drawing on Hymes' (1972) discussion, Canale and Swain (1980) redefined communicative competence in an organised and thorough manner. In their dichotomy, OCS fall under strategic competence, which is divided into verbal and non-verbal strategies that speakers 'employ to handle breakdowns in communication' (p.25). With the growing popularity of Communicative Language Teaching in the 1980s and its application in language classes, OCS have been extensively researched from various perspectives.

From a theoretical perspective, OCS have been described as interactional and psycholinguistic. While interactionists consider OCS a mutual attempt by conversation partners to handle communication breakdowns (Tarone, 1980), the psycholinguistic view explains OCS as learners coping with breakdowns by using their cognitive skills, such as problem-solving (Faerch & Kasper, 1983), rather than relying on an interlocutor. During the 1980s and 1990s, many researchers proposed several taxonomies based on these two distinct views. Despite the varied names, some strategies overlap in these taxonomies (see Dörnyei & Scott, 1997, for the similarities and differences). In 2006, Nakatani developed an OCSI inventory that lists listening and speaking strategies separately on interactional and psycholinguistic grounds. According to this inventory, the classification of speaking strategies is presented in Table 1. This most up-to-date inventory has been widely used in various contexts (Gökgöz, 2008; Isa, 2017; Najjari, 2016; Ounis, 2016).

Table 1

Speaking Strategies in Nakatani's (2006) OCSI Inventory (p. 155-156)

Speaking Strategies	Learner Behaviour
1. Social affective	controlling anxiety, risking making mistakes, avoiding silence, enjoying communication
2. Fluency-oriented	attention to rhythm, intonation, pronunciation, clarity of speech
3. Negotiation for meaning while speaking	conducting modified interaction, checking listener's understanding, repeating speech, giving examples
4. Accuracy-oriented	attention to forms, seeking grammatical accuracy by self-correction
5. Message reduction and alteration	reducing an original message, simplifying utterances, using similar expressions to ones with confident use

6. Nonverbal strategies while speaking	using eye contact to attract attention, using gestures and facial expressions to give a hint
7. Message abandonment	giving up attempt to communicate, leaving the message unfinished, seeking help from others to continue communication
8. Attempt to think in English	thinking in English during interaction

While these theoretical perspectives and taxonomies have largely been developed within face-to-face communicative contexts, the widespread use of OLEs requires reconsideration of OCS use in digitally mediated interactions. In OLEs, interaction is shaped not only by linguistic competence, but also by technological affordances and modes of communication. Moore's (1989) Model of Interaction conceptualises distance education through learner-content, learner-instructor, and learner-learner interactions, positioning these interactions as a key site for communicative engagement. Building on this foundation, the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison et al., 1999; Garrison, 2016) conceptualises effective online learning as the integration of social, cognitive, and teaching presence across synchronous and asynchronous modes of digital interaction. Within this framework, learners must actively manage communication, regulate affect, and sustain discourse under conditions of reduced non-verbal cues and technological mediation. OSC can therefore be conceptualised as learner-level mechanisms through which social presence and cognitive presence are enacted during online interactions. Affective strategies support social presence by helping learners manage anxiety and project themselves socially, while negotiation for meaning and planning and organising strategies facilitate cognitive presence by sustaining meaning-making processes. From this perspective, OCS use represents a strategic response to the interactional demands of OLEs.

Earlier OCS Studies

OCS mainly appear in two strands of research. First, experimental studies have shown that strategy training can be effective in helping students cope with communication breakdowns (Nakatani, 2005); however, reviewing these studies is beyond the scope of this paper.

The second line of studies is descriptive, portraying learners' OCS use as reported through questionnaires or inventories, and as observed through their learning behaviours. Although this body of research provides valuable practical insights, a problem is that the findings are not comparable and, thus, not generalizable because the studies use a wide range of inventories based on various taxonomies (Chou, 2018; Hua et al., 2012; Manzano, 2018; Uztosun & Erten, 2014). On the other hand, many other studies employing Nakatani's (2006) OCSI inventory yield similar results across various EFL contexts with young adult

learners majoring in a range of departments, such as English language teaching, where the primary focus is not on language learning (Ha et al., 2022; Hsieh, 2014; Huang, 2010; Najjari, 2016; Ounis, 2016; Pawlak, 2015; Yaman et al., 2013). The majority of these studies identify 'negotiation for meaning' as the most widely used strategy, and 'message abandonment' as the least, with a few exceptions. However, a closer analysis of studies involving EFL learners primarily focused on language learning indeed shows a similar trend, without exception across various face-to-face settings (Demir et al., 2018; Meigouni & Shirkhani, 2020; Nakatani, 2006; Rayati et al., 2022). While these observed patterns are extremely valuable in understanding learners' communicative behaviours in class, they do not have implications for OLE, where the nature of communication is completely different from face-to-face communication.

On the other hand, the number of studies on learners' OCS behaviours in OLE is rather limited, and the results are inconsistent due to several issues. The aforementioned 'different-inventory-use issue' applies here as well; therefore, it is difficult to demonstrate a trend in learners' behaviour. To illustrate, Parcon and Reyes (2021), working with 36 high school students, used Dörnyei and Scott's taxonomy and analysed recordings of online discussions. The most frequently used strategy here was code-switching. Nevertheless, Shih (2014) investigated the strategy development of five graduate students from different majors in Taiwan using Tarone's taxonomy and reported that 'non-verbal communication' was the most frequent strategy, while 'all-purpose words' was the least. Therefore, different taxonomies lead to inconsistent results. Another problem is the presentation of only thick descriptive data. For instance, Aljohani and Hanna (2023) examined the online oral performances of 24 Saudi EFL learners. They categorised learners' OCS based on a compilation of various taxonomies they developed and reported the range of observed strategies qualitatively using example meaning units rather than frequency counts, which makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions. A study by Cirit-Işıklıgil et al. (2023) compared OCS use across face-to-face, videoconferencing, and virtual-world environments. The results indicated that fillers and self-repetition were the most frequently used strategies shared across all settings, but no significant differences were observed among learning environments. Only one study similar to the present one used Nakatani's (2006) OCSI inventory for analysis (Huang & Loranc, 2022). Huang and Loranc collected data from 70 EFL learners from Poland and Taiwan over a twelve-week period as part of an exchange project conducted in an OLE. Interestingly, 'negotiation for meaning' and 'message abandonment' were reported to be the most and least frequently used strategies respectively, consistent with results from face-to-face settings.

Proficiency Levels and Exposure to Target Language in OCS Use

The impact of proficiency level on OCS use has been the focus of many studies. However, the findings are mixed: some studies show no significant difference in OCS use between high- and low-proficiency groups (Huang, 2010; Uztosun & Erten, 2014) or a weak correlation (Demir et al., 2018), while other studies report inconclusive results or that certain

strategies are employed more often than others (Ounis, 2016; Rayati et al., 2022; Yaman et al., 2013). Overall, further research employing the same taxonomy and well-defined proficiency levels is necessary to draw conclusions.

Despite the limited opportunities in EFL settings, exposure to the target language outside formal school instruction and its effect on OCS use are additional research questions that have attracted researchers' attention. All of these studies report a significant positive change in learners' use of OCS when they have greater exposure to the target language (Demir et al., 2018; Huang, 2010; Zhao, 2013). Another way to be exposed to the target language in EFL settings is through formal instruction; however, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, no study has investigated its impact on OCS use, although exposure to formal instruction has been collected as demographic information (Hua et al., 2012; Pawlak, 2018). This study intends to shed light on this variable.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine tertiary-level EFL learners' use of OCS in OLEs. By analysing learners' responses to the OCSI using descriptive and inferential statistical procedures, the design enables a systematic investigation of relationships among OCS use, proficiency level, and length of formal instruction.

Participants

Data were collected using convenience sampling from 93 preparatory-year students enrolled in EFL at a Turkish state university. The university offers a preparation year for students to improve their English language skills. While some faculties make the preparation year mandatory (as their medium of instruction is 30% or 100% English), others offer it as an elective course. Courses at three levels (A2, B1, and B2 CEFR) are offered to students, and they are placed into one of these levels by an in-house placement test administered at the beginning of each academic year. A course takes nine weeks to complete, and students are expected to attain the B2 level to be considered successful in the programme. The courses are standardized and intensive with 21 lessons per week. At the time of data collection, the participants had already completed one nine-week course and they were pursuing their second course. The distributions of participants' proficiency levels and lengths of formal instruction are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Demographic Information of the Participants

Proficiency Level	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
A2	6	6.5

B1	73	78.5
B2	14	15.1
Total	93	100

Length of Formal Instruction	**Frequency (n)**	**Percentage (%)**
0 – 6 months	59	63.4
7 months – 1 year	6	6.5
2 – 5 years	6	6.5
6 – 9 years	15	16.1
10 – 15 years	7	7.5
Total	93	100

Instrument

The Turkish version of the OCSI Inventory, originally devised by Nakatani (2006) and adapted to Turkish by Kavaşoğlu (2011), was used in this study. The original scale (Nakatani, 2006) included two sections with listening and speaking strategies, but only the speaking section, adapted by Kavaşoğlu (2011), was employed in this study. The reliability of the adapted scale with 23 items and five strategy categories was reported to be 0.79 (Cronbach's alpha) by Kavaşoğlu (2011); therefore, no further factor analyses were conducted.

Data Collection

Prior to data collection, ethical approval from the university Research Ethics Committee and approval from the Institutional Review Board were granted. Because the distance education program was implemented during data collection, the scale was prepared in Google Forms and distributed via class WhatsApp groups.

The scale on Google Forms consisted of three sections. In the first section, participants were informed about the research details, and their informed consent was requested. Unless they gave their consent, they would not be able to move on to the next page. The second page included items on demographic information, and on the final page participants were asked to rate items about their OCS behaviours.

The form was sent to over 200 students, yet only 98 of them completed it. The researchers noticed that one participant had completed it twice and two participants had

completed it three times; therefore, those answers were removed. The final sample size available for data analysis was 93.

Ethical Review Board: Science, Engineering and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

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Data Analysis

Because construct validity had been established and all factors were found valid and reliable in the original study (Kavaşoğlu, 2011), only internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach's alpha = 0.72). Descriptive statistics were used to present the demographic information. Mean scores for each item and for each strategy category were computed to enable comparisons between categories.

Further analysis was performed on the relationships between the independent variables, namely proficiency level and length of formal instruction, and OCS use (the dependent variable). To enable detailed interpretation of the findings, correlation analysis, one-way ANOVA, post hoc (LSD) tests, and regression analysis were conducted using SPSS version 22.

RESULTS

EFL Learners' OCS Use in OLE

To address the first research question "What OCS are used by EFL learners in OLE?" descriptive statistics were computed using SPSS and the mean scores for each item and category were calculated. These are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics of OCS Use

Categories	N	Min-Max	$\overline{X}$	SD
Negotiation for Meaning	93	2.29-5.00	3.8	.49
Message Abandonment	93	1.25-5.00	2.8	.77
Planning / Organising	93	1.40-4.80	3.5	.65
Affective	93	1.33-5.00	3.5	.74
Compensatory	93	2.50-5.00	3.7	.60

The results show that participants in OLE reported using the 'negotiation for meaning' strategy most often and 'message abandonment' least often.

Impact of EFL Learners' Proficiency Level on Their OCS Use

For the second research question, "How does EFL learners' proficiency level impact their OCS use in OLE?" Pearson's correlation analysis indicated no significant relationship between proficiency level and OCS use, as displayed in Table 4. Therefore, no further analyses were performed.

Table 4

Correlaton Analysis of Proficiency Level and OCS Use

Correlation of Proficiency Level and OCS Use	Pearson Correlation	Significance (2-tailed)
Negotiation for Meaning	.124	.238
Message Abandonment	-.138	.188
Planning / Organising	-.075	.475
Affective	.000	.998
Compensatory	.065	.539

Impact of EFL Learners' Length of Formal Instruction on Their OCS Use

For the third research question, "How does EFL learners' length of formal English instruction impact their OCS use in OLE?", Pearson's correlation analysis demonstrated a statistically significant association between affective strategies and participants' formal instruction (Table 5), highlighting that participants who dedicated more time to formal instruction used more affective strategies in their communication.

Table 5

Correlation Analysis of the Participants' Formal Instruction Length and OCS Use

Correlation of Formal Instruction and OCS Use	Pearson Correlation	Significance (2-tailed)
Negotiation for Meaning	.136	.192
Message Abandonment	-.078	.458
Planning / Organising	-.148	.157
Affective	.222	.032*

Compensatory	.172	.099

* The correlation is significant at $p < 0.05$ level.

Based on this finding, a regression analysis was performed to determine the extent to which these two variables were correlated. The impact of formal instruction on the participants' use of affective strategies was found to be low (4.9%) but statistically significant (Table 6).

Table 6

Regression Analysis of the Participants' Formal Instruction and Affective Strategy Use

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	B	S	Beta	t	P	R	R^2	F	*p*
Formal Instruction	**Affective Strategies**	3.354	.130	.222	25.798	.00	222	.049	4.738	.032

To examine differences in subgroup mean scores for formal instruction and OCS use, a one-way ANOVA was conducted. As Table 7 shows, there is a significant difference in 'planning/organising' strategy use across different time periods of formal instruction [0-6 months (M=3.62, S=.60), 7 months-1 year (M=3.23, S=.29), 2-5 years (M=3.06, S=.70), 6-9 years (M=3.69, S=.55) and 10-15 years (M=3.08, S=1.05)]. The effect size was close to moderate (eta squared 0.046). Moreover, post hoc tests (LSD) showed that participants who received formal instruction lasting between 0 and 6 months used planning and organising strategies more than those who had received 2-5 years or 10-15 years of instruction (Table 8).

Table 7

One-way ANOVA Results of OCS and Formal Instruction

Strategy Categories	Formal Instruction	N	$\overline{X}$	SD	P
Negotiation for Meaning	0-6 Months	59	3.82	.53	.638
	7 Months-1 Year	6	3.76	.28	
	2-5 Years	6	3.76	.39	
	6-9 Years	15	3.99	.46	
	10-15 Years	7	4.02	.45	
Message Abandonment	0-6 Months	59	2.87	.72	.111

	7 Months-1 Year	6	2.12	.68	
	2-5 Years	6	3.08	.43	
	6-9 Years	15	2.86	.96	
	10-15 Years	7	2.46	.75	
Planning / Organising	0-6 Months	59	3.62	.60	.044*
	7 Months-1 Year	6	3.23	.29	
	2-5 Years	6	3.06	.70	
	6-9 Years	15	3.69	.55	
	10-15 Years	7	3.08	1.05	
Affective	0-6 Months	59	3.45	.82	.183
	7 Months-1 Year	6	3.94	.32	
	2-5 Years	6	3.61	.57	
	6-9 Years	15	3.75	.52	
	10-15 Years	7	4.00	.66	
Compensatory	0-6 Months	59	3.73	.63	.507
	7 Months-1 Year	6	3.62	.37	
	2-5 Years	6	3.91	.43	
	6-9 Years	15	3.91	.58	
	10-15 Years	7	4.07	.60	

* $p<0.05$

Table 8

Post Hoc Test (LSD) Results

Strategy Categories					

LSD	(I) Formal Instruction	(J) Formal Instruction	Mean Difference (I-J)	S	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Planning / Organising	0-6 Months	7 Months-1 Year	.39	.27	.154	-.1487	.9295
		2-5 Years	.55*	.27	.043	.0179	1.0962
		6-9 Years	-.06	.18	.705	-.4334	.2942
		10-15 Years	.53*	.25	.036	.0351	1.0410

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Overall, the findings indicate that EFL learners in OLE most frequently employ 'negotiation for meaning' strategies and least frequently use 'message abandonment'. While OCS use showed no significant change across proficiency levels, length of formal English instruction was modestly but significantly associated with affective strategies, and regression analysis confirmed that formal instruction accounted for 4.9% of the variance in their use. Further group comparisons revealed a significant difference in planning and organising strategies across instructional length groups, with learners who had received 0-6 months of formal instruction using these strategies more frequently than learners with 2-5 years or 10-15 years of instruction.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine the OCS behaviours of EFL learners whose primary aim is to learn the English language in OLE. Further statistical analyses were conducted to investigate the impact of learners' proficiency level and formal instruction on their OCS behaviours.

The first research question sought to identify the OCS behaviours of EFL learners in OLE. According to the descriptive statistics, EFL learners use the 'negotiation for meaning' strategy most frequently and 'message abandonment' least frequently in their communication breakdowns in OLE. This result is in line with Huang and Loranc (2022), who similarly adopted Nakatani's (2006) OCSI inventory and identified the same strategies as the most- and least-frequently used during online discussions. This congruence may be attributed to the similarity of online class content. In other words, although the participants in Huang and Loranc (2022) were pursuing education-related majors (which means they

were not merely language learners, unlike the participants in this study), they were asked to respond to the inventory as EFL learners who participated in online discussions as part of their twelve-week project, where the purpose was simply to communicate their messages in English. This is similar to the interactions in EFL classes. Consequently, we conclude that when learners attempt to communicate their ideas in OLE, they most often prefer to negotiate meaning with the teacher or peers to overcome communication breakdowns, and they are least likely to leave their message incomplete.

On the other hand, this result contradicts other studies conducted in OLE (Cirit-Işıklıgil et al., 2023; Parcon & Reyes, 2021; Shih, 2014), since the inventories adopted in these studies relied on taxonomies other than Nakatani's (2006) and did not include negotiation as a strategy in those inventories. Therefore, they all demonstrated different strategies as their most- and least-frequently employed ones, which poses a challenge for comparing results.

The results pertaining to the first research question also allow comparison of learners' OCS behaviours between face-to-face learning environments and OLEs, owing to the adoption of the same inventory in many previous studies. To illustrate, the majority of the studies conducted with university students across various contexts that adopted Nakatani's (2006) OCSI inventory (Demir et al., 2018; Meigouni & Shirkhani, 2020; Najjari, 2016; Ha et al., 2022; Ounis, 2016; Pawlak, 2015; Rayati et al., 2022; Yaman et al., 2013) show that 'negotiation for meaning' and 'message abandonment' are the most and least frequently applied strategies, respectively, in face-to-face learning environments. More precisely, the participant samples in Meigouni and Shirkhani (2020), Rayati et al. (2022), and Demir et al. (2018) comprise EFL learners whose primary purpose was to learn English, similar to the sample in this study. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that not only in Türkiye but in any EFL context, when learners encounter communication problems while trying to convey their messages, they predominantly rely on other interlocutors, such as their teacher or peers and consider leaving their message incomplete a last resort. As a result, the alignment of these results with previous OCS studies that used the same inventory and the same participants suggests that the instructional mode does not appear to affect EFL learners' OCS behaviours. Whether face-to-face or online, EFL learners prefer to negotiate first to convey their messages, which lends support to the interactionist perspective. From the CoI perspective, this tendency can be interpreted as learners actively sustaining cognitive presence in OLEs by negotiating meaning to maintain shared understanding when contextual cues are reduced.

The second research question aimed to investigate the impact of proficiency level on learners' OCS behaviours. Some previous studies have identified an association between the two variables. Although the strategies used by high-proficiency learners may vary, low-proficiency learners tend to use 'message abandonment' strategies more than high-proficiency learners (Hsieh, 2014; Mei & Nathalang, 2010; Nakatani, 2006; Ounis, 2016). However, the current analyses have revealed no significant relationship between the

proficiency level and OCS behaviour, supporting Huang (2010), and Uztosun and Erten (2014). One possible reason is the uneven distribution of participant levels. While the majority of the participants were at the B1 level during data collection in this study, only six were at the A2 level and 14 were at the B2 level. A correlation analysis with a more balanced distribution of participants across proficiency levels might yield different findings.

The last research question investigated the impact of the participants' length of formal instruction on their OCS behaviours, an area not previously explored. To begin with, a significant positive correlation was noted between learners' length of formal instruction and affective strategies, highlighting that the longer the formal instruction learners receive, the more affective strategies they employ. However, based on the regression analysis, only 4.9% of this phenomenon can be explained by formal instruction, indicating a weak but significant association. This suggests that as learners receive further instruction, they are exposed to the target language for longer periods and they tend to overcome communication breakdowns through affective strategies rather than through other strategy types, such as planning or negotiation. Within the CoI framework, the increased use of affective strategies may reflect learners' enhanced ability to project social presence, enabling them to regulate emotions and sustain participation in online interaction. This result supports studies demonstrating the link between exposure to the target language and OCS (Demir et al., 2018; Huang, 2010; Zhao, 2013), emphasizing the relationship between OCS behaviours and exposure based on learners' informal as well as formal learning experiences. However, further research is necessary to determine whether this result applies to other settings and to identify which other factors, beyond the length of formal instruction, influence learners' affective OCS behaviours.

A closer analysis of the connection between formal instruction and OCS reveals that participants in the early stages of formal instruction (up to 6 months) used 'planning/organising' strategies significantly more than participants who had spent longer time on formal instruction. This shows that, in the beginning phase of their language-learning journeys, L2 learners pay more attention to the organization of words at the sentential level and think more about the rules of the target language than experienced language learners do. This result supports the Skills Acquisition Theory, which proposes that beginning learners cannot automatize their language knowledge within a short timeframe because proceduralisation of knowledge requires time and practice. Therefore, learners depend on their declarative knowledge base when attempting to make meaning (de Keyser, 2017). At this point, by 'beginning-level learners', we do not mean to equate this term with the proficiency label 'beginners'; rather, we mean learners who have just begun their language-learning journeys, because we believe the two terms denote different groups. A learner may receive formal instruction for years, yet they may still be at a beginning level of proficiency. However, they may have more language-learning experience than novice learners. Therefore, this finding should be interpreted with caution. Further conceptual

research to clarify definitions of proficiency levels and more empirical research to distinguish proficiency levels from language-learning experience are necessary.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this quantitative study is to investigate what OCS EFL learners use in OLE and how the proficiency level and length of formal instruction impact learners' OCS behaviours. For this purpose, 93 EFL learners studying at a Turkish state university completed Nakatani's (2006) adapted OCSI Inventory via Google Forms. The results indicated that 'negotiation for meaning' strategies were used most and 'message abandonment' strategies were used least in EFL language-learning contexts, highlighting a notable similarity between face-to-face and online settings. Further statistical analyses did not show a significant relationship between OCS use and proficiency level. However, a significant positive correlation was found between 'affective' strategies and the participants' length of formal instruction. Novice learners with English learning experience between 0 and 6 months were found to use 'planning/organising' strategies more than participants with longer English learning experience. Overall, these findings highlight the importance of considering learners' instructional histories when interpreting OCS use in OLE.

These findings offer several pedagogical implications not only for language teachers but also for all educators delivering online courses. For language teachers, learners' strong reliance on 'negotiation for meaning' suggests that tasks requiring clarification, confirmation, and collaborative repair can be effectively incorporated into online speaking activities. The limited use of 'message abandonment' indicates a need for explicit instruction in communication strategies to help learners sustain communication when they encounter breakdowns during online interactions. From the CoI perspective, such task designs contribute to cognitive presence by encouraging learners to actively construct and confirm meaning through interaction. More broadly, teachers across all disciplines can draw on these insights while designing online lessons to support learners' interactional, emotional, and organisational needs. Structured opportunities for peer discussion in breakout rooms, clear guidelines for asking questions, and modelling how to handle misunderstandings can enhance online communication in any subject area. These practices also facilitate social presence by creating a supportive OLE in which learners feel confident in participating and expressing themselves. Furthermore, the link between instructional length and the use of affective and planning and organising strategies highlights the importance of providing novice learners with emotional scaffolding, planning tools such as checklists, and reflective prompts, all of which help them manage anxiety and prepare for online tasks. By intentionally supporting communication, emotional regulation, and self-organisation, teachers of all subjects can create more engaging and effective OLEs.

Like many other studies, this study has limitations. First, the sample size was small (n=93), and the study was conducted at a single university. While the results cannot be

generalized, future research incorporating larger and more varied cohorts would strengthen the scope and applicability of these findings. Secondly, a survey design was adopted in this research. A qualitative approach using class observations and stimulated-recall interviews might provide a deeper understanding of why learners prefer certain OCS in OLE. Thirdly, the majority of participants in this study were at the B1 level. Replication of this study using purposive sampling may allow additional statistical analyses, yielding more conclusive results on the relationship between learners' proficiency levels and OCS behaviours. Finally, further research is necessary to clarify the relationship between OCS use and the duration of learners' formal instruction. Closely intertwined with that, proficiency level and length of formal instruction should be treated as two separate variables and clearly defined.

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