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Lexical Compensation Strategies and Social Linguistic Proficiency Among Iraqi EFL Undergraduate Students: A Correlation Study

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between lexical compensation strategies used by Iraqi EFL university students and their sociolinguistic proficiency. Despite years of studying English, many Iraqi undergraduate students frequently encounter lexical gaps when communicating, often struggling to maintain fluency and interaction when vocabulary limitations arise. This raises the critical question of how learners bridge these gaps and whether their strategic compensation correlates with broader sociolinguistic competence across diverse contexts. This research is valuable because it highlights the role of lexical compensation strategies in bridging communicative breakdowns and enhancing language performance. The findings provide practical insights for EFL educators and curriculum designers in Iraq, offering empirical support for integrating strategy-based instruction into undergraduate English programs to foster more adaptable and communicatively competent learners. Utilizing a random sample of (320) third-year students from the Departments of English at the Colleges of Education for Human Sciences in the Universities of Baghdad and Tikrit for the academic year 2025/2026, data were gathered using a Lexical Compensation Strategies scale and a Sociolinguistic Proficiency test. The results demonstrated that the sociolinguistic proficiency of Iraqi EFL university students is at a good level, and that lexical compensation strategies are positively correlated with it.

Keywords: Lexical Compensation Strategies, Social Linguistic Proficiency, EFL Undergraduate Students.

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Introduction

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Interlinguistic means of communicating across cultures have proven to be one of the most enduring hallmarks of global politics and the economy, where the ability to discourse in a tongue other than one's own has become an immensely overarching skill. The witness for the prosecution is how to convey information meaningfully, but this is not quite as straightforward as readers might think. There are people who, having years of language class behind them, cannot speak with natives from the land they have travelled to for their second language. The native listener will probably infer what the correct grammatical use of an utterance by the language learner ought to be. However, the speaker may not be aware of the social value of such an utterance in the target culture (Canale & Swain, 1980).

As Cortazzi (1999) explains، foreign language schools are based on a model in which the target language is only an instrument for learning, not necessarily a tool for communicating and socializing. This means that in large EFL contexts, the language class essentially consists of a more or less endless stretch of decontextualized practice forms, so students are deprived of the socio-linguistic and cultural input they need to use this competence. No norms are provided for the wrongness, as in an effort to achieve accurate language use; improper language is socially and culturally ingrained in native speakers' linguistic environment, but learners need to empirically learn how to use words within the rule-based format to make speaking effective.

On the same line, in a per diem theory-based world, given that post-2000 communication is predominantly via International English, both case studies and empirical evidence suggest the significance of intercultural learning. However, scholars may be practicing very differently from practitioners—and not necessarily 'collaborators': While EFL experts underline the implications for pedagogies, as have done Lazar et al. (2007), few teacher educators / foreign language instructors seem to include those theories, and many applied hardly any limited empirical market research on intercultural communication. The fact that the language has socio-linguistic and cultural issues makes it harder for EFL teachers and students. Although it seems clear that teachers need to help

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students achieve high-level socio-linguistic competence, the difficulties lie in delimiting the issues and defining aspects of socio-linguistic competence in instruction. This research segregates the problem between the types of solutions with answers through knowing:

1. Iraqi EFL university students' levels in lexical Compensation strategies.
2. Iraqi EFL university students' levels in social linguistic proficiency.
3. The correlation between Iraqi EFL university students' lexical Compensation strategies and Social Linguistic Proficiency.

1.2 Aims of the Research

The present research aims at:

1. Finding out third-year Iraqi EFL university students' level of lexical Compensation strategies.
2. Finding out third-year Iraqi EFL university students' level of Social Linguistic Proficiency.
3. Identifying the correlation between third-year Iraqi EFL university students' lexical Compensation strategies and Social Linguistic Proficiency

1.3 Limits of the Research

This research is restricted to third-year college students enrolled in English at the Iraqi Colleges of Education in Baghdad and Tikrit universities during the academic year (2025-2026).

1.4 Values of the Research

The current research's findings help:

1. Help teachers and instructors learn social linguistic proficiency and help them prepare assignments that allow students to work on their Social Linguistic Proficiency.
2. University students, it would help them become aware of the impact of social and cultural factors on their EFL learning.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Concept of Lexical Compensation Strategies

Generally, learners are also exposed to new words and try to decode them. This is the meaning-derivation process, also called LI. It is, according to Haastrup (1991), the final ability to make reasonable and insightful predictions about what a lexical item will mean, taking into consideration the full range of linguistic data available from both external

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language and their own background knowledge, understood possible contexts or general systems patterning relevant for language.

Lexical inferencing, thus, perhaps is not limited to contextual guessing from this standpoint. Context, for example, is just one type of knowledge on the continuum from lexical inferencing to sources that are learners (Schmitt, 2010). Lawson & Hogben (1987,p.43) wrote: "The more proficient the learners, the greater will be their potential benefit from learning words learned in context." According to Carter (1987), Second language learners use three types: intralingual, interlingual, and extralingual. Lexical compensation strategies enable learners to build lists of items and words that they have at least some knowledge of (Brown and Yule, 1983). Most research on lexical strategies has focused on inferring words (Bengeleil & Paribakht, 2006). It is a kind of lexical inferencing, and they expect that the learner's strategic processes will permeate their knowledge. Form-focused and meaning-focused strategies: Learners of this method reinforce what they already know about word attributes, treating them as contextual meanings. The way it classifies itself is heavily related to cognition and meta-cognition together- cognition processing- tracking Processes that guide cognitive behaviours.

2.2 Types of Lexical Compensation Strategies

There are many types of Lexical Compensation strategies, as follows:

• **Form-focused strategies**: EFL students tend to employ form-focused strategies (Hu & Nassaji, 2012). Certain techniques—for example, stemming—are also quite useful for inference. This lets us determine the component(s) of an inferred word, and with knowledge of those component meanings (for example, if you had prior knowledge of the affixes), we can infer what a good meaning for a word would be. The guessing mechanism works when students can correlate inferring terms, especially when all the words share at least some phonetic or orthographic characteristics. However, cumulating what we have already found regarding the prior method of learning addressed by Nassaji (2003), repetition remained dominant; this not only aided learners in utilising information but also provided a correlated term within the framework of a sentence, as shown.

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• **Meaning-oriented Strategies**: The strategies from Bunparit and Chinokul (2018) / Hu and Nassaji. These are contingent upon a context-based approach to the content, as they are comprehensible, inferred from contextual information, and interpreted in the context. Because we have already reviewed the plausibility constraints for individual words, learners can often use context to infer the meaning of words. If a sense representation was inferred over some context segment. However, it does not seem semantically plausible; paraphrase/translate text segments using target terms to determine whether each target term is meaningful in the model. The learner relied most frequently on sentence-level context, which accounted for correct responses (Kobayashi, 2011). Besides context-based techniques, learners also rely on knowledge learned earlier. Availability of the background enables students to focus more on linguistic knowledge and input that are triggered by textual clues, which leads to a partial understanding, as in most cases, readers create meanings for unfamiliar words from text (Pulido, 2007)

• **Evaluation Strategies**: By contrast, Hu and Nassaji (2012) assert that evaluation strategies evaluate target meanings or check. The strategies of evaluation include students investigating, determining whether the meanings drawn from words confirm or refute conclusions reached about text content, and either confirming or rejecting implied meaning. Meaning can be critical & reflective about what we do know, which leads to positive uses being made of reflection — Period will be the uses that have come from carrying it out.

• Monitoring Types of Strategies Monitoring types are cognitive operations that reveal the extent to which students represent the usage features of texts, as mediated by lexical inferencing (Hu & Nassaji, 2012). As with assessment methods, monitoring strategies are found to be related to metacognitive awareness. The monitoring types this work examined included retrying the new inference and delaying judgment, as well as whether inferred words are failures or have difficulty being inferred. The use of these tactics could be seen as proof that a competent exercise program is underway. For instance, Hu and Nassaji (2014) found that L2 learners do not immediately understand the meanings of unknown words after first encountering them. The data were certainly abundant enough to support it, but people drew conclusions based solely on word

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meanings. appears to afford a quasi-protective effect upon the means and outcomes of lexical inferencing. Moreover, at the bottom of it all, whether to use some set of tools or techniques comes back to the failure question. The claim must be discussed: use a strategy, and it will always have a positive effect on Lds lexical inferencing. While the focus of this paper is on strategy implementation, we also investigate a few other determinants that lead to less success.

3.3 Social Linguistic Proficiency

It is essential to recognize that the activities permitted or restricted by established rules are also shaped by the categories inherent in a specific register of use within the same context, thereby enabling these functions to be effectively exercised. This competence is therefore considered "secondary" in educational praxis due to its close association with the sociocultural dimension of foreign language acquisition. Each sociolinguistic component within this context, such as the distinct sound of an inexperienced speaker's voice, contributes to the complexity of language learning. Nonnative speakers may not always fully utilize their pragmatic and sociopragmatic competence, often relying on culturally bound pragmatic transfers. This tendency persists unless explicit efforts are made to identify which communicative situations require specific language use. Cross-cultural communication is characterized by significant differences, including substantial communication gaps and frequent miscommunication between interlocutors.

Social linguistic is inextricably linked to Anthropology (specifically, the individual and the role of language in shaping culture) for those who approach sociolinguistics from this angle, and to Sociology because it also pertains to the way we use language to hierarchize social groups and organizations (Yule 1999). Second, it connects to social psychology regarding the identification of in-groups and out-groups, as well as the articulation of values and beliefs. In the modern world, where one has to converse in a foreign tongue or, for that matter, translate what he/she wants, it is now imperative. Moreover, second/foreign language acquisition does not merely involve knowing impoverished systems of structural, discoursal, and strategic conventions; it also involves internalizing socio-linguistic norms for appropriate forms. They speak the language as they know how to use it in multiple scenarios. These

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communicative "activities" will require knowing how capable a speaker is in each language and sociocultural context when it comes to producing spoken language (what is said or not, according to the genre, and how it is stated in the most appropriate way within sociolinguistic conventions). These activities could represent proverbial thinking, like an affair, by benefiting your personal world or by sharing debates, and in many ways. Critical thinking skills should also be taken into consideration (Fairclough 1995). This means enabling someone to narrate the interaction in context; what ends (or effects) does the discourse generated (or could generate if different ones arise) accomplish; which kinds of voices were called on in any given instance (the polyphony), and which fell mute as language was selected.

Hymes (1972) identifies four components: Linguistic, Discourse, Strategic, and SC. Socio-linguistic competence is just another name for knowing the sociocultural norms of language use: knowledge of how to use language and respond appropriately. Bell [20] describes this as knowledge of how these different norms affect the use (and interpretation) of language in specific socio-linguistic and sociocultural domains.

3. Procedures

This section elaborates on the procedures used to achieve the aims of this research: the experimental design, the population, the sample, and the equivalence between students in the Experimental and control groups. Second, the instrument's characteristics and its administration for the research.

3.1 Population and Sample of the Research

Population is defined as the whole of elements from which a sample is drawn according to Best and Khan (2006). In the 2024–2025 academic year, participants were Iraqi EFL University students in their third-year morning class of English programs at educational institutions (except in the Kurdistan Region). The population is composed of 320 were randomly selected for the research, and, as shown in Table 1, students are from colleges of Education at two universities (Baghdad University and Tikrit University).

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Table 1: *The Sample of the Research*

	Names of Iraqi Universities	Sample
1	Baghdad University /College of Education/ Ibn Rushd for Human Sciences	155
2	Tikrit University /College of Education for Human Sciences	165
	Total	320

3.2 Instruments of the Research

As defined by Thomas et al. (2014), "instrumentation is how one measures the variable in research." The test and scale are then developed following a literature review. In this sense, each instrument has the following illustration:

3.2.1 Lexical Compensation Strategies Scale

This scale is derived from the definitions of lexical Compensation given by Hu and Nassaji (2014), who define it as the integration of knowledge with knowledge about how learners intend to employ it. The Classification attends to cognitive and metacognitive processing; it includes 12 minor strategies and 4 major strategies.

3.2.2 Social Linguistic Proficiency Test

The Social Linguistic Proficiency Test consists of two parts: Part one is the students' recall level or knowledge (also known as recognition). 40 items under 4 questions are the level of recognition. Part two, the Production Level, consists of 2 questions/ of 30 items. The researcher adapted the test to the steps outlined to make it fit for this purpose.

3.3 Scoring the Research Guide

A scoring system was developed to render the learning tools more subjective and in line with current research goals.

3.3.1 Scoring of Lexical Compensation Strategies Scale

The scale is scored on a five-point Likert scale (5, 4, 3, 2, 1). Scores allocated for each response. Strongly agree = 5 Agree = 4 Undecided = 3 Disagree = 2 Strongly disagree=1

3.3.2 Scoring of Social Linguistic Proficiency Test

It is a 100-score test, with a maximum of 100 and a minimum of 0 (which cannot be passed), and 50 is the average passing score. There are two sections in this dataset: Part I: `The Recognition part' and Part II: `The Production part'. In this part, there are four recognition questions, each with ten items that give one point if answered correctly and zero if

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answered incorrectly; on a scale from A to E, twenty items (min—0, max. Number four: 10 items – In each of the 10 cases, score one point for a correct answer. This module is worth 40 total scores. There are 2 questions at the production level, and question 1 includes 20 items or situations to put the correct word or term; earn a score of 2 if the answer is correct, otherwise 0. Spelling mistakes are not considered. Production level: Part 2, Full Score = 40 Points — Total of 10 Items. 10 situations require regular day-to-day answers (responses must be brief). Score complete marks in response. Publishing is one outlet for part of an answer — everything else goes to none. We do not examine your errors in spelling or grammar. The production total is 60, too.

3.4 Validity

3.4.1 Face Validity

Face validity is defined as the extent to which a measure seems to be appropriate for measuring its intended construct (Leedy & Ormrod, 2004). To ensure face validity of the constructed post-test, the test was presented to a jury (a panel of experts in methodology and linguistics) for their treatment and recommendations regarding the adequacy/makeover of the items. They all agreed that the test items are proportionate to students' levels of participation.

3.4.2 Construct Validity

Construct validity is "the extent to which an instrument measures the trait, theoretical ability, or construct that it is intended to measure," according to Collins et al. (2010). By looking at the correlation patterns among the scores attained by the subjects' answers to the tests and scale items, the construct validity of the instruments may be assessed. The following steps have been taken to guarantee the construct validity:

1. finding out the items’ discrimination powers; and
2. finding out the item-total correlation of each instrument.

3.5 Reliability of the Test

Reliability can be defined as the characterization of agreement when it lies between two methods of the same test (Harrison, 1983). Internal consistency of test scores is defined by Crocker and Algina (1986) as the degree to which a learner's score on a given measure at two or more occasions is consistent across occasions, based on a common facilitative procedure. The test's reliability was assessed using objective Test-retest,

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Equivalence of forms, and internal consistency. In this research, the reliability of data is demonstrated through a split-half method.

4. Analysis of Data and Discussion of Results

4.1 Results Related to the First Aim

First aim: Assessing Iraqi EFL university students' levels of lexical Compensation strategies. To meet this objective, the researcher used the Lexical Compensation Strategies Scale with a sample of 320 students. The researcher then computed the arithmetic means for each strategy separately, after sorting all responses. The one-sample t-test was used to determine whether the difference between the arithmetic mean of each strategy and its theoretical mean was significant, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Mean Scores, Standard Deviation, and t-values of the Lexical Compensation strategies

Variable	N	Theoretical Mean	SD	Mean scores	T- Values		Level of Significance (0.05)
					computed	critical	
Word Focused Strategies	320	9	2,778	10,432	11, 470	1,96	Significant
Meaning-focused strategies	320	9	2,581	10,774	15, 270	1,96	Significant
Evaluation strategies	320	9	0.3076	9,517	3,740	1,96	Significant
Monitoring strategies	320	9	2,543	10.380	12, 072	1,96	Significant

It is evident from the Table above that:

1. The mean of the sample on the strategy of (word-focused strategies) was (10.432) with a standard deviation of (2.778) and a theoretical mean of (9). The computed t-value was (11.470), which is greater than the critical t-value (1.96) at a significance level of (0.05) and degrees of freedom (319). This means the research sample employs this strategy at a high level.
2. The mean of the sample on the strategy (meaning focused strategies) was (10.774) with a standard deviation of (2.581) and a theoretical mean of (9). The computed t-value was (15.290), which is greater than the critical t-value (1.96) at a significance level of (0.05) and degrees of

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freedom (319). This means the research sample employs this strategy at a high level.

3. The mean of the sample on the evaluation strategy was (9.517) with a standard deviation of (3.076) and a theoretical mean of (9). The calculated t-value was (3.740), which is greater than the tabulated t-value (1.96) at a significance level of (0.05) and degrees of freedom (319). This means the research sample employs this strategy at a high level.

4. The arithmetic mean of the sample on the (monitoring strategy) was (10.380) with a standard deviation of (2.543) and a theoretical mean of (9). The calculated t-value was (12.072), which is greater than the tabulated t-value (1.96) at a significance level of (0.05) and degrees of freedom (319). This means the research sample employs this strategy at a high level.

4.2 Results Related to the Second Aim

Second aim: Finding out the level of Iraqi EFL University Students' Social Linguistic Proficiency. The social linguistic proficiency test was administered by the researcher to the sample. The mean score on this test for this sample was 60.129 (SD, 15.496). The researcher used the one-sample t-test to determine whether the difference between the mean score and the theoretical mean of 50 is significant. The difference was found to be significant at the 0.05 level of significance, as the calculated t-value (14.256) was higher than the tabulated t- value (1.96), and degrees of freedom were computed to be 319. This shows that the research sample has sufficient social-linguistic abilities, as explained in Table 3.

Table 3

Arithmetic Mean, Standard Deviations, and t-test Values of the Social Linguistic Proficiency *Test*

Variable	N	Theoretical Mean	SD	Mean Scores	T- Values		Level of Significance (0.05)
					computed	critical	
Social Linguistic Proficiency	320	50	15,496	60.129	14, 256	1,96	Significant

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4.3 Results Related to the Third Aim

Third Aim: Identifying the correlation between Iraqi EFL university students' Lexical Compensation Strategies and Social Linguistic Proficiency. To verify this goal, the researcher has collected the research sample's responses on the scale used for lexical compensation strategies and their responses to the socio-linguistic competence test. After that, using the Pearson correlation coefficient to prove it, as indicated in Table 4.

Table 4

The Correlation between Lexical Compensation Strategies and Social Linguistic Proficiency

Variable	N	The value of the correlation coefficient	SD	T- Values		Level of Significance (0.05)
				computed	critical	
Word Focused Strategies	**320**	**0,511**	**2,778**	**15,969**	**1,96**	**Significant**
Meaning-focused strategies	**320**	**0,518**	**2,581**	**16,187**	**1,96**	**Significant**
Evaluation strategies	**320**	**0,383**	**, 3076**	**8,511**	**1,96**	**Significant**
Monitoring strategies	**320**	**0,371**	**2,543**	**8,244**	**1,96**	**Significant**

The above table shows that correlation coefficients for various Lexical Compensation Strategies and Social Linguistic Proficiency were (0.511, 0.518, 0.383, 0.371). A t-test for the significance of one correlation coefficient was used to test the significance, and the obtained t-values were (15.969, 16.187, 8.511, 8.244), respectively; all are greater than (1.96), the tabulated value at the (0.05) level in degrees of freedom (319). This means that the relationship between Lexical Compensation Strategies inferences and social linguistic proficiency is strong and shows that when students do better with these strategies, their Social Linguistic Proficiency will also be enhanced.

5. Conclusions

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This research reached the following conclusions:

1. Social Linguistic Proficiency was employed to investigate control and evaluation strategies in word processing among Iraqi EFL students. Creative students demonstrated greater adaptation to the EFL academic and social context, as well as enhanced vocabulary acquisition.
2. Students focused on identifying text features and images to derive meaning, rather than spending most of their time deciphering unfamiliar vocabulary. Instead, they relied on their existing knowledge of conversation, world knowledge, grammar, and vocabulary.
3. Students are between educational goals and competency, providing students an opportunity to gain a better sense of where they stand in relation to one another as far as creative thinking, and pushing them towards controlling appropriate action within communicating purposes when it comes to how they use viewing to see language for their structures.

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استراتيجيات التعويض المعجمي والكفاءة الاجتماعية اللغوية لدى طلبة المرحلة الجامعية العراقيين متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية بوصفها لغة اجنبية :دراسة ارتباطية

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مستخلص البحث:
يبحث هذا الدراسة في العلاقة بين استراتيجيات التعويض المعجمي التي يستخدمها طلبة الجامعات العراقيون دارسي اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية وبين كفاءتهم اللغوية الاجتماعية. على الرغم من سنوات دراسة اللغة الإنجليزية العديدة، يواجه العديد من طلبة الجامعات العراقيين فجوات معجمية متكررة أثناء التواصل، وغالباً ما يعانون من صعوبة في الحفاظ على الطلاقة والتفاعل عند ظهور قيود مفرداتية؛ مما يثير التساؤل حول كيفية ردم المتعلمين لهذه الفجوات وما إذا كان تعويضهم الاستراتيجي يرتبط بالكفاءة اللغوية الاجتماعية الأوسع عبر مختلف السياقات. تكمن أهمية هذه الدراسة في تسليط الضوء على الدور الحيوي الذي تلعبه استراتيجيات التعويض المعجمي في ردم الثغرات التواصلية وتعزيز الأداء اللغوي. وتقدم النتائج رؤى عملية لمطوري المناهج ومعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية في العراق، وتوفر دعماً تجريبياً لدمج التدريس القائم على الاستراتيجيات في برامج اللغة الإنجليزية للمرحلة الجامعية لتشجيع متعلمين أكثر مرونة وكفاءة تواصلية. باختيار عينة عشوائية مكونة من (320) طالباً وطالبة من طلبة المرحلة الثالثة في أقسام اللغة الإنجليزية بكليات التربية للعلوم الإنسانية في جامعتي بغداد وتكريت للعام الدراسي 2026/2025، جُمعت البيانات باستخدام مقياس استراتيجيات التعويض المعجمي واختبار الكفاءة اللغوية الاجتماعية. وأظهرت النتائج أن الكفاءة اللغوية الاجتماعية لطلبة الجامعات العراقيين دارسي اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية هي بمستوى جيد، وأن استراتيجيات التعويض المعجمي ترتبط ارتباطاً طردياً إيجابياً بها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: استراتيجيات التعويض المعجمي ،الكفاءة الاجتماعية اللغوية ومتعلمي اللغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية.