Adopting Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication Strategies in Oral Discussion by Omani University Students

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Abstract

Effective communication, both verbal and non-verbal, is key to the success of university students in academic and professional settings. This paper examines how Omani university students use these communication strategies during oral discussions, focusing on the balance between spoken words and non-verbal cues like body language and eye contact. The study finds that while students mostly rely on verbal communication, non-verbal signals play an important role in making their message clearer and more impactful. Recommendations are offered to help students better integrate both forms of communication, improving their readiness for both academic challenges and future careers.

Introduction

Communication is a vital skill that shapes how we connect with others, especially in academic and professional environments. For university students, being able to express ideas clearly during discussions is critical, whether in classrooms, group projects, or future careers. Verbal communication—what we say—is often the focus, but non-verbal communication—how we say it through gestures, facial expressions, and body language—is just as important. This study looks at how Omani university students use both verbal and non-verbal communication strategies in oral discussions. By understanding how they approach communication, educators can help students improve these skills and prepare them for more effective participation in both academic and professional life.

This paper aims to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent do Omani foundation year students appropriately employ verbal behavior such as asking questions in oral communication?
2. How effective are Omani FY students in the use of filler words in spoken discourse, and what explains the limited production of these fillers?
3. In what way do Omani foundation year students' non-verbal communicative act such as gesture influence their oral discourse skills?
4. To what extent students in the foundation year in Oman keep proper eye contact during oral discussions and in what way does it affect the communication success?

Research Design

The study adopts the pragmatism approach in which the researcher has more freedom in the choice of the research method and focuses and investigates the research problem to find solutions. This approach is

applied to a convergent parallel mixed method based on a questionnaire of both open- and closed-ended questions and observation as primary instruments for collecting both quantitative and qualitative data required to achieve the objectives and prove the hypotheses of the study. The purpose of implementing the mixed method is to extent the understanding of the research problem and to find out both researcher's and teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards students' awareness of using lexical competence, grammatical competence and strategic competence (verbal/ non-verbal strategies) as well as to evaluate students' practice and use of the same competences.

Population and Sampling

The participants are selected from Sohar University, Oman as they were willing and available to be studied. The study included 22 teachers and 70 Omani EFL elementary level students from different majors in the foundation year program in the academic semester 2019/2020. Students' age is between 18-20 years. The researcher chose this context due to that foundation year program is the first step of students' academic study and their access to higher education of several specializations. Thus, investigating students' barriers in using of three dimensions which are lexical competence, grammatical competence and strategic competence in oral communicative competence at an early stage will raise their awareness of this issue and will narrow down their communicative needs to be taken into account by their teachers in teaching and learning process. Unlike the teaching context of the school, the researcher couldn't find enough lecturing time, activities and an appropriate number of teachers to apply his instruments. In other words, SU students attend different courses cover all language skills and do one to two presentations for each so the researcher had enough time and opportunities to observe the students.

Instrumentation

The researcher designed and implemented a questionnaire and a non-participatory observation checklist for data collection of the study. The following two sub-sections describe the aims, contents and predicted outputs of the research tools.

Teachers' Questionnaire

The questionnaire was given to 22 teachers of the foundation year program at SU. It consisted of 3 sections; the first section collected teachers' background information which are qualifications and teaching experience. The second section includes three categories of 18 statements investigated teachers' opinions and attitudes towards the barriers encountering Omani foundation year students in using grammatical structures, vocabulary and assess their awareness of using verbal and non-verbal communication strategies in classroom conversations. It applied a Likert five-point scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree) and the third section involves an open-ended question to determine and express factors affecting students' use of oral communicative competence (see appendix A).

Students' Observation Checklist

"Studying people in their native environment permits the researcher to discover what situations they ordinarily meet and how they behave in them" (Becker, 1958, p. 652). To find out the students' problems in using oral communicative competence and their actual practice in sense of grammatical, lexical and strategic abilities in the classroom speaking activities, the observation was carried out. The observation checklist of two sections used to collect information about obstacles that inhibit Omani EFL foundation

year students' oral communicative competence. The first section included 15 statements accompanying with three options (always, sometimes and never) to evaluate the extent to which students practice correct grammatical structures in discussions and their use of lexical competence and assess their awareness of adopting verbal and non-verbal communication strategies in classroom conversations. Also, the second section involved the researcher to specify other observable barriers influencing students' use of the three competencies (see appendix B).

Data Collection Procedure

Hard copies of the questionnaires were randomly distributed to 22 teachers and used the observation checklist for 70 Omani elementary level students from the foundation year program at Sohar University in cooperation with their teachers. The students were observed in their scheduled lectures of courses. The observation conducted on students to gather information about barriers inhibiting their use of grammatical competence, lexical competence and verbal and non-verbal communication strategies in given situations during speaking classes. At the same time, the researcher distributed the questionnaire to the teachers to quantitatively and qualitatively measure the perceptions of Omani foundation year students in using oral communicative.

The questionnaire was given to a teacher at the foundation year programme at Sohar University to be distributed to all other teachers of English who teach a speaking skill. The process of collecting data of the questionnaires took around two weeks in November 2019. Similarly, the data of the observation were gathered throughout five weeks in November and December 2019. The observation sessions occurred in three different classes of 20 - 25 elementary level students in speaking lessons with assisting of their teachers.

Data Analysis

4.1.6 Results Relevant to the Third Question: To what extent do Omani EFL foundation year students adopt verbal and non-verbal communication strategies in oral discussion?

4.1.6.1 Statement (10): They know how to accept/ refuse invitations in a polite way

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	0	0.0
Agree	0	0.0
Neutral	12	54.5
Disagree	9	40.9
Strongly disagree	1	4.5
Total	22	100.0

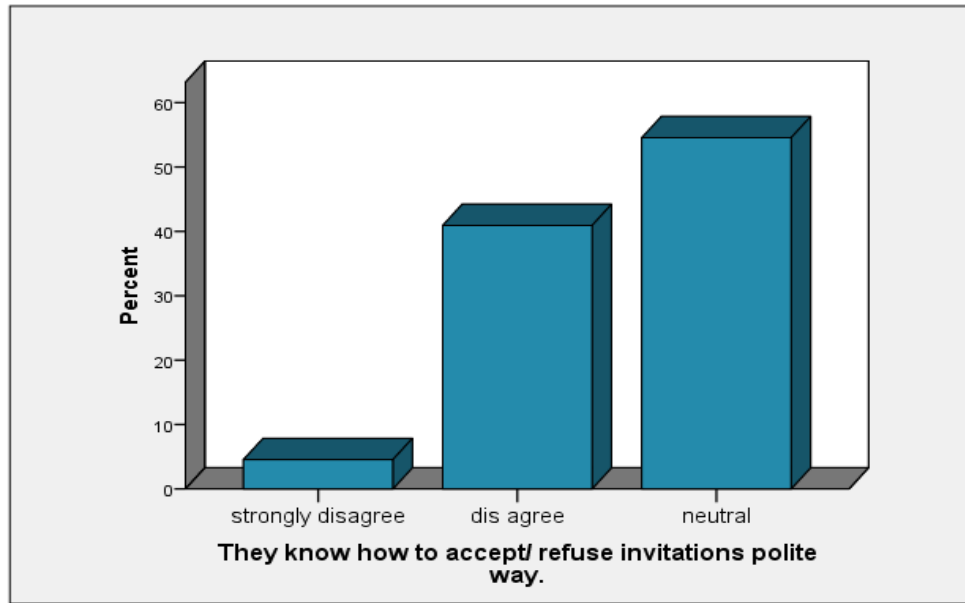**Table (4.15): Accepting / refusing invitations politely**

Figure (4.14): Accepting / refusing invitations politely

The above table and figure demonstrate the extent to which foundation year students know how to accept/ refuse invitations politely in conversational situations. The percentages show that the majority of respondents (54.5%) are neutral with the argument. More than 40% of teachers disagree and only 4.5% strongly disagree, while 0.0% of them are agreed and strongly agreed. It is noticed that most of the participants disapprove the claim that learners know how to accept/ refuse invitations in a polite way.

4.1.6.2 Statement (11): They manage to keep the flow of speech in spite of linguistic issues

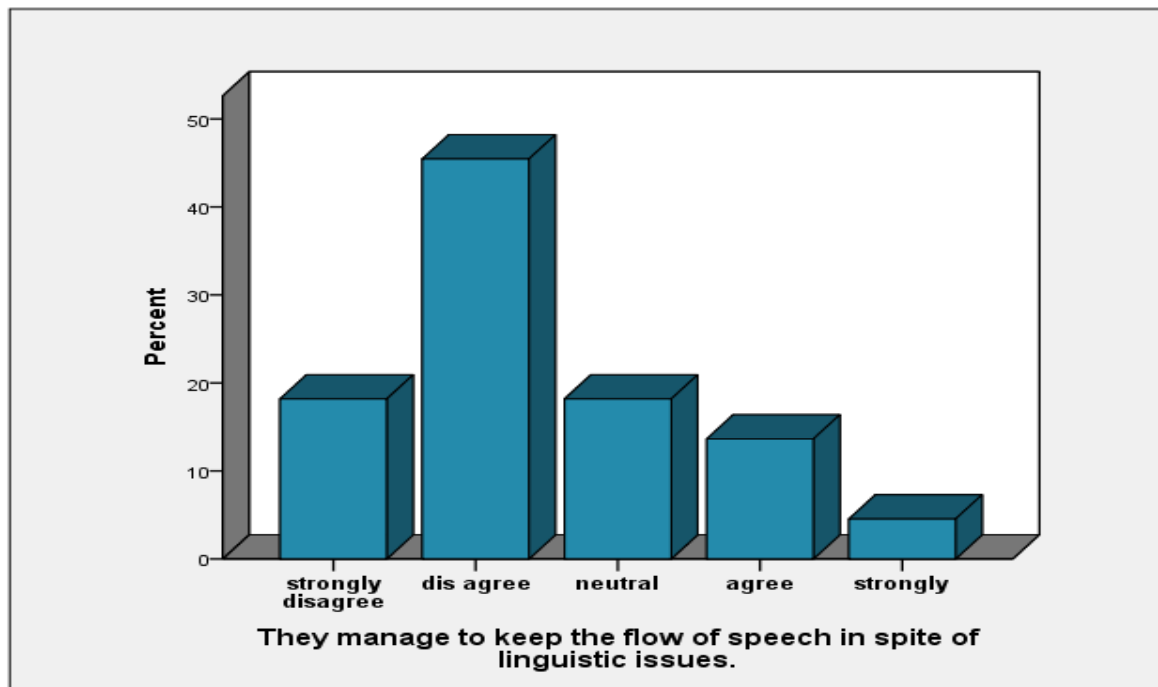|	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	1	4.5
Agree	3	13.6
Neutral	4	18.2
Disagree	10	45.5
Strongly disagree	4	18.2
Total	22	100.0

Table (4.16): Keeping the flow of speech

Figure (4.15): Keeping the flow of speech

Table (4.16) and figure (4.12) represent the results of learners' ability to manage to keep the flow of speech despite linguistic issues when communicating. The minority of participants agree with the statement with the percentage of 13.6% and 4.5% of them strongly agree. The results show that 45.5% of the participants disagree and 18.2% strongly disagree. Overall, these percentages assert that the majority of foundation year students are unable to keep the flow of speech in spite of linguistic issues when speaking.

4.1.6.3 Statement (12): They know how to interrupt politely to speak

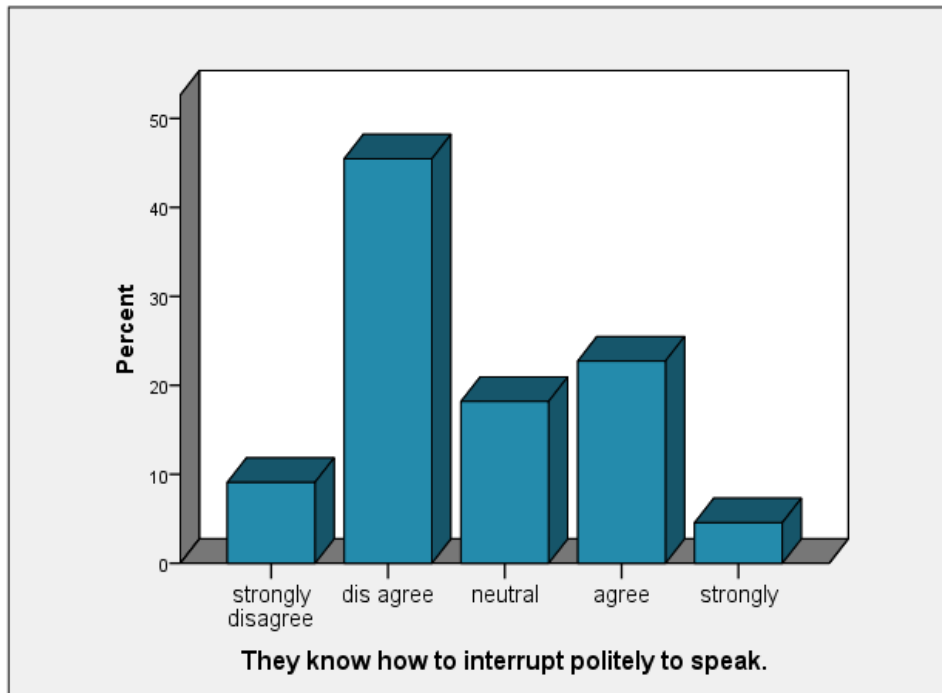|	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	1	4.5
Agree	5	22.7
Neutral	4	18.2
Disagree	10	45.5
Strongly disagree	2	9.1
Total	22	100.0

Table (4.17): Interrupting politely to speak

Figure (4.16): Interrupting politely to speak

As in table (4.17) and figure (4.13), the percentages show that the majority of respondents (45.5% disagree and 9.1% strongly disagree) that foundation year students know how to interrupt politely to speak in conversations. Also, 27.2% of participants are in agreement with the statement and 18.2% are neutral. Therefore, the results do not support the above claim.

4.1.6.4 Statement (13): They ask questions for clarification

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	0	0.0
Agree	4	18.2
Neutral	10	45.5
Disagree	7	31.8
Strongly disagree	1	4.5
Total	22	100.0

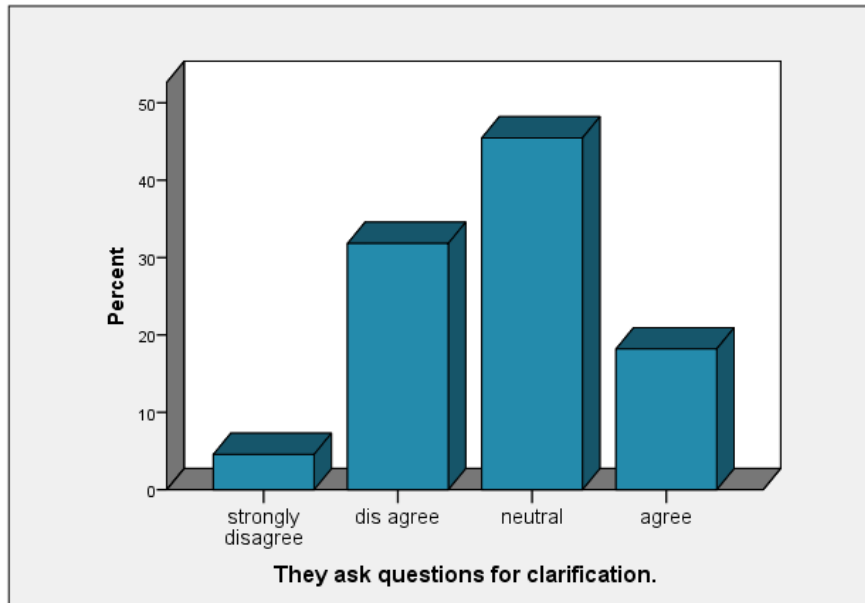**Table (4.18): Asking questions for clarification**

Figure (4.17): Asking questions for clarification

The table and figure above show that 18.2% of the sample agree with the claim that learners can ask questions for clarification when communicating. More than 31% of them disagree and 4.5% strongly disagree. It is clear that most of the teachers do not support the statement.

4.1.6.5 Statement (14): They know how to change the topic to redirect discussion towards a new one

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	0	0.0
Agree	1	4.5
Neutral	4	18.2
Disagree	11	50.0
Strongly disagree	6	27.3
Total	22	100.0

Table (4.19): Channing the topic to redirect discussion towards a new one
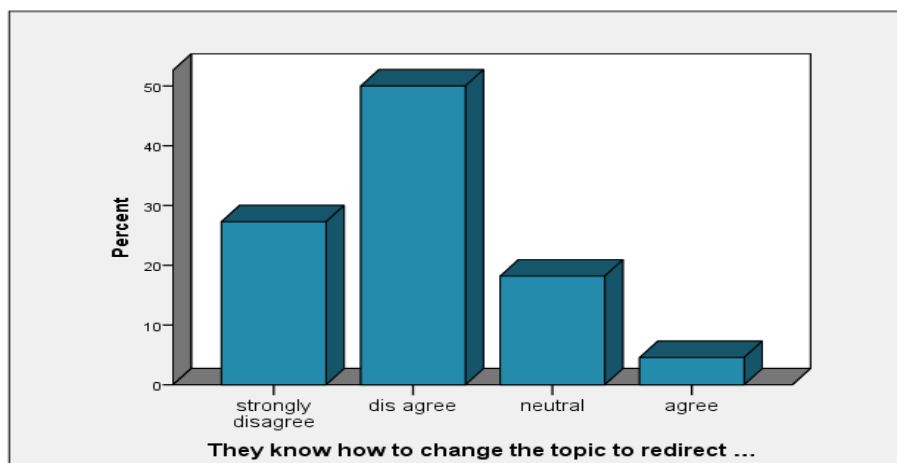

Figure (4.18): Channing the topic to redirect discussion towards a new one

The above table and figure demonstrate the extent to which foundation year students know how to change the topic to redirect discussion towards a new one in conversational situations. The percentages show that the minority of respondents (4.5%) agree with the idea. More than 27% of them strongly disagree and 50% disagree, while 18% of them are neutral. It is noticed that the majority of the participants do not support the claim that students know how to change the topic to redirect discussion towards a new one.

4.1.6.6 Statement (15): They articulate conversation filler words

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	0	0.0
Agree	5	22.7
Neutral	2	9.1
Disagree	9	40.9
Strongly disagree	6	27.3
Total	22	100.0

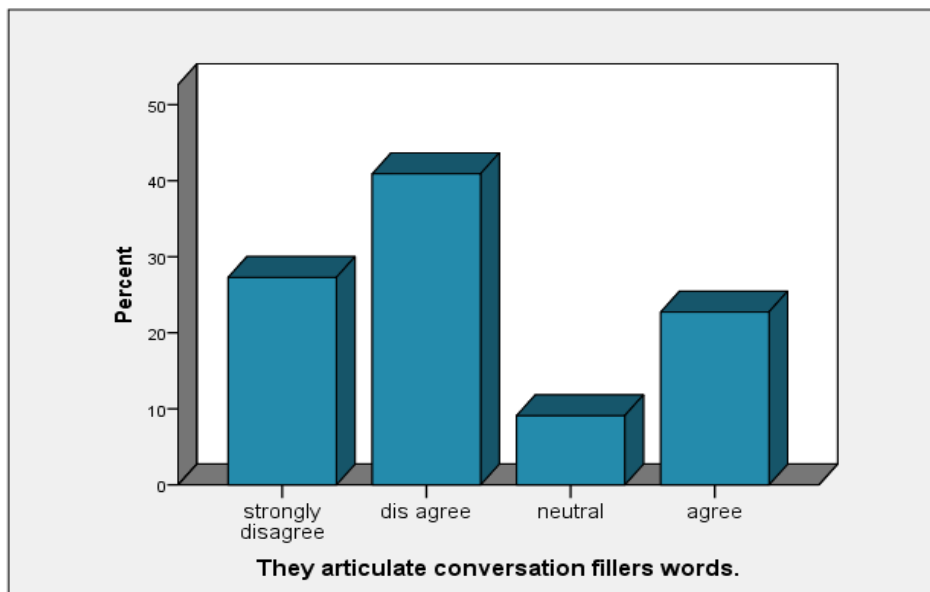**Table (4.20): Articulating conversation filler words**

Figure (4.19): Articulating conversation filler words

The table and figure clarify the extent to which foundation year students articulate conversation filler words. The percentages show that 0.0% of participants are strongly agreed, 22.7% agree and 9.1% are neutral. More than 40% of teachers disagree with the argument and 27.3% strongly disagree. It is clear that the majority of the teachers (68.2%) do not support the statement (see table 4.18 and figure 4.16).

4.1.6.7 Statement (16): They use gestures appropriately and naturally

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	0	0.0
Agree	5	22.7

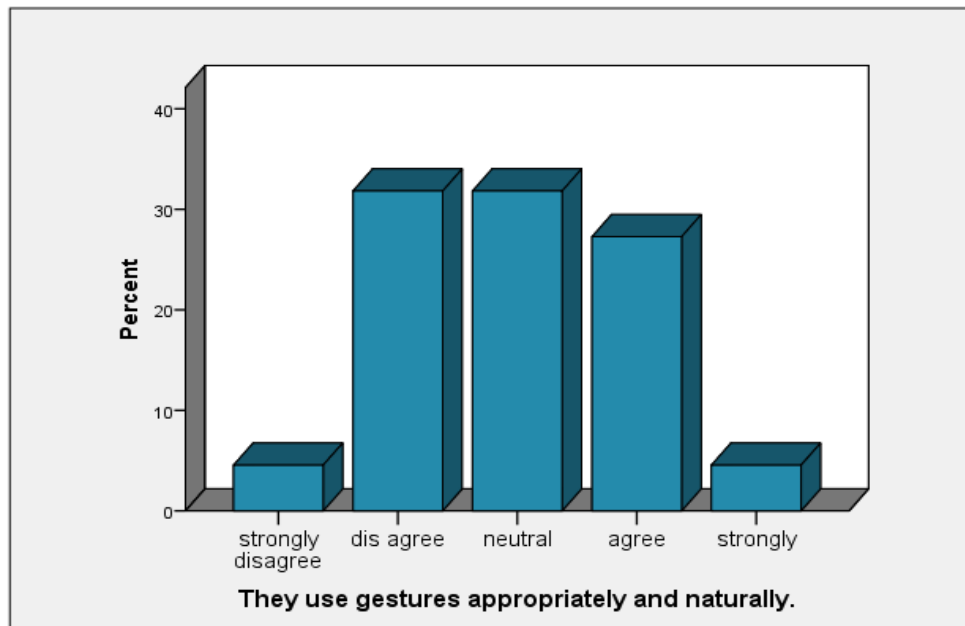| Neutral	2	9.1
Disagree	9	40.9
Strongly disagree	6	27.3
Total	22	100.0

Table (4.21): Using appropriate gestures

Figure (4.20): Using appropriate gestures

The above table (4.21) and figure (4.12) illustrate the percentages of learners' ability to use gestures appropriately and naturally when communicating. The minority of participants are neutral to the statement with the percentage of 9.1% and 22.7% of them agreed. The results show that 40.9% of the participants disagree and 27.3% strongly disagree. Overall, these percentages assert that the majority of foundation year students (68.02%) are unable to use gestures appropriately and naturally when speaking.

4.1.6.8 Statement (17): They adopt appropriate body language while communicating

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	0	0.0
Agree	4	18.2
Neutral	10	45.5
Disagree	8	36.4
Strongly disagree	0	0.0
Total	22	100.0

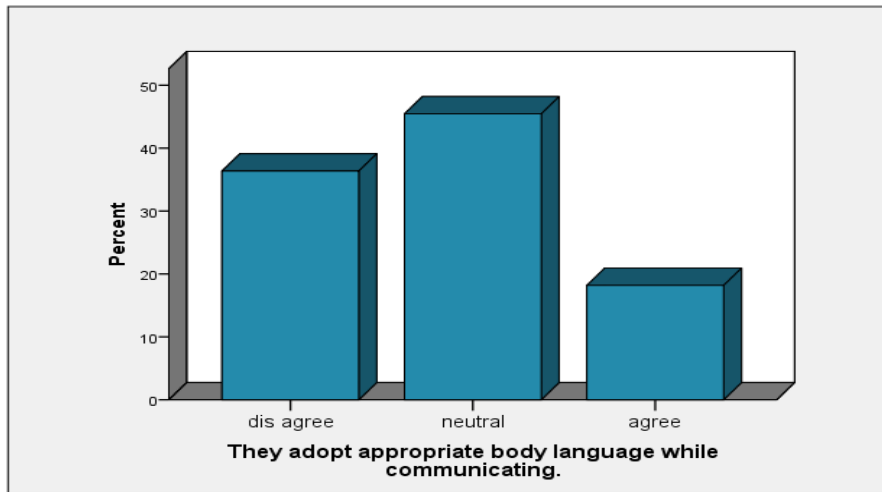**Table (4.22): Adopting suitable body language**

Figure (4.21): Adopting suitable body language

The above table and figure display the extent to which foundation year students use appropriate body language in conversations. The percentages reveal that only 18.2 of respondents agreed to the claim, while more than 45% of them are neutral. Also, 36.4% of them disagree and 0.0% strongly disagree. It is noticed that the majority of the participants do not believe that learners can adopt appropriate body language in oral communication.

4.1.6.9 Statement (18): They keep effective eye contact with the audience

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	0	0.0
Agree	5	22.7
Neutral	6	27.3
Disagree	10	45.5
Strongly disagree	1	4.5
Total	22	100.0

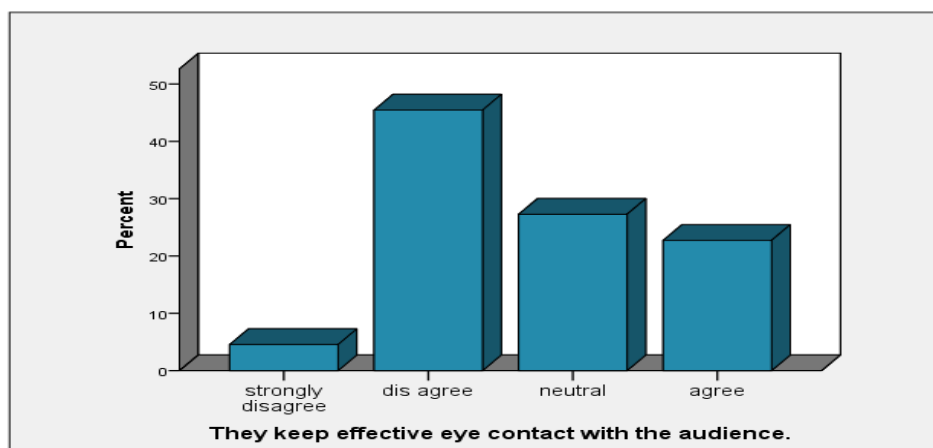**Table (4.23): Keeping effective eye contact**

Figure (4.22): Keeping effective eye contact

As in table (4.23) and figure (4.19), the results show that the only 22.7% of respondents agree that foundation year students can keep effective eye contact with the audience in conversational situations which is, approximately, less than the ratio of participants who disagree on the same issue (45.5%). Overall, the majority of the teachers (50%) reject the above statement.

Table (4.24): Means, standard deviations and estimation for the domain of students' strategic competence of the questionnaire

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

It appears from the table (4.24) which shows means, standard deviations and estimation of the domain of Omani EFL foundation year students were low on items (10, 11, 14, 15) with an average between (1.80-2.59), this means that teachers disagreed that Omani foundation students can use these strategic competences. The average of items (12, 13, 16, 17, 18) is moderate with average between (2.60-3.39), which means that teachers are not sure if foundation students do these strategic competences.

Conclusion

For Omani university students, mastering both verbal and non-verbal communication is essential for meaningful participation in oral discussions. This study shows that while students focus heavily on what they say, non-verbal cues like body language and facial expressions also play a big role in how their message is received. Blending these two forms of communication makes discussions more engaging and effective. Universities should provide opportunities to develop these skills, ensuring students are well-prepared for the demands of the modern workplace, where strong communication abilities are increasingly important.

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