

Evaluating the Communicative Competence of EFL Students in Iraqi Universities

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ABSTRACT

Recent teaching methods have made communication competence (CC) a central component, and the enhancement of EFL students' communicative competence has been given a great deal of attention in recent years. Within this context, this study was designed to assess the CC of Iraqi students majoring in English Language and literature at the tertiary level. In order to achieve this objective, the researchers aimed to collect responses from 509 Iraqi EFL students who are affiliated to six universities in different geographical regions of Iraq. The questionnaire used for this purpose consisted of 36 items which addressed six themes, namely *General Competence*, *Behavioral Flexibility*, *Empathy*, *Affiliation/Support*, *Social Relaxation*, and *Interaction Management*. The study addressed five research questions. The quantitative analyses of the collected data showed that Iraqi EFL students have, generally speaking, a moderate level of CC, and that their CC was significantly affected by their age. However, the gender and affiliation of the participants did not have any statistically significant impact on their CC. In addition, the results showed that there is a positive correlation between the five facets of CC. Based on the study results, it can be concluded that the CC of Iraqi EFL students is not well-developed and need to be improved. Therefore, the study suggested some pedagogical implications to improve their communicative competence.

KEY WORDS: Communicative competence, Iraqi universities, Iraqi EFL learners, quantitative analysis, communicative competence components.

1. INTRODUCTION

Communicative competence is the ability to effectively communicate in a variety of contexts. It involves understanding the language, cultural norms, and social conventions of a particular situation. It also involves being able to express oneself clearly and accurately in order to achieve desired outcomes. In order for someone to be considered communicatively competent, they must possess all these facets of communicative competence. They must also be able to apply these facets in different contexts and situations.

For example, someone who is communicatively competent should be able to adjust their language depending on whether they are speaking with a friend or a business associate. They should also be able to adjust their communication style depending on whether they are speaking in an informal setting or a formal one.

Communicative competence is an important skill for anyone who wants to be successful in any field. It is especially important for those who work with people from different backgrounds or cultures, as it allows them to understand and interact with others more effectively. It can help people succeed in many areas of life. Those who possess it will have an advantage over those who do not, when it comes to job interviews or other situations where communication skills are essential for success. Similarly, EFL students who are communicatively competent will outperform those whose communicative competence is poor.

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It is observed that many EFL students at Iraqi universities are not good enough in their communicative skills. They find difficulty using English language communicatively. In light of this, the aims of the current research are:

- a) to assess the level of the CC of Iraqi EFL students at the tertiary level,
- b) to determine whether their CC is influenced by their gender, affiliation and age or not.
- c) to investigate the correlation between the five components of CC proposed by Wiemann (1977).

In accordance to these aims of the study, the following are the research questions that need to be answered:

1. What is the level of communicative competence of Iraqi EFL students?
2. Is there any statistically significant effect of gender on Iraqi EFL students' communicative competence?
3. How does Iraqi EFL students' affiliation affect their CC?
4. Does the age of Iraqi EFL students have an effect on their level of communicative competence?
5. Is there any correlation between the five components (*Behavioral Flexibility, Empathy, Affiliation/Support, Social Relaxation, and Interaction Management*) of CC?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The history of the term 'Communicative Competence' dates back to the 1960s when American linguist and anthropologist Dell Hymes introduced this concept in opposition to Noam Chomsky's conception of linguistic competence which focused solely on grammar. In 1972, Hymes claimed, in his seminal study titled "On Communicative Competence", that linguistic competence alone is not enough for effective communication. The capacity to use language effectively in varied social and cultural circumstances, he said, is just as important as knowing grammar and vocabulary. He stressed the significance of being aware of the conventions and standards that vary from culture to culture when it comes to talking to one another. Additionally, Hymes (1972) emphasized the value of thinking about communication from a sociolinguistic perspective. He emphasized that people need to be cognizant of dialects, registers, and social group-specific linguistic differences. By keeping this in mind, people are better able to modify their

language usage to suit the needs of their various audiences.

Since its introduction by Hymes (1972), the notion of "communicative competence" has been developed further by a number of researchers. According to the model proposed by Canale and Swain (1980), CC consists of four subcomponents: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. (the model will be elaborated in the next section). Significant progress has also been made in the study and teaching of CC within the subfields of applied linguistics and foreign language learning. It sparked the evolution of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methods, which place an emphasis on effective communication rather than grammatical correctness when instructing foreign languages. Communicative proficiency is still widely recognized as an important area of study in the field of language studies. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is only one example of how it has influenced language teaching practices and standards.

2.1 Communicative Competence Models

Several different models of CC have been suggested by researchers in the field of linguistics and communication studies. Following are four prominent models of them.

2.1.1 Hymes' SPEAKING Model

The speaking model of CC, developed by Dell Hymes in 1974, offers a structure for learning about the various aspects of good communication. It was created in response to Noam Chomsky's original model of linguistic competence, which placed more emphasis on grammatical understanding than on other aspects of language usage. The following elements make up the speaking framework:

1. **Setting and Scene:** This is the social and physical setting in which communication takes place.

It incorporates location, time, and the nature of the participants' relationships into any communicative interaction.

2. **Participants:** This aspect of communication centers on the people engaged, taking into account their respective roles, identities, social positions, and the information they bring to the table.

3. **Ends:** Ends refer to the goals or purposes of communication. Here, the goals that drive the conversation, whether that be sharing knowledge, expressing feelings, or trying to sway others are considered.

4. **Act Sequence:** The order and composition of a conversation is called its "act sequence." Learning how to greet, request, or apologize are all examples of speaking behaviors that contribute to effective communication.

5. **Key:** The term "key" pertains to the overall tone or mood conveyed in communication. The elements encompassed in this context are those pertaining to the level of formality or informality, the degree of politeness, and the cultural norms that exert an influence on the manner in which messages are both conveyed and interpreted.

6. **Instrumentalities:** Instrumentalities encompass various forms of communication, such as verbal language, written discourse, nonverbal cues like body language, facial expressions, and gestures, among others.

7. **Norms:** Norms can be defined as the established social regulations or anticipated behaviors that govern interpersonal interactions within a specific community or cultural context. The aforementioned norms encompass linguistic norms, which pertain to grammar rules, sociolinguistic norms, which govern appropriate language use in various contexts, and interactional norms, which regulate turn-taking patterns.

8. **Genre:** Genre refers to the distinct category or manner of communication employed within a particular context, such as distinguishing between conversational and lecturing modes of discourse. Various genres possess distinct conventions and expectations. (Hymes, 1974, pp.55-60)

The SPEAKING model places significant emphasis on the consideration of various components to comprehend and analyze communication within authentic contexts. Each component represents a different aspect of communicative competence and helps to understand how individuals use language in specific social situations. It is emphasized in this statement that communicative competence includes not just linguistic proficiency, but additionally a consideration of the social and cultural dimensions of communication.

2.1.2 Wiemann's Model of CC

Another model of CC was presented by Wiemann (1977), and it consists of the following five components: *interaction management*, *empathy*, *affiliation/support*, *behavioral flexibility*, and *social relaxation*. Wiemann (1977) defined CC as "the ability of an interactant to choose among available communicative behaviors in order that he may successfully accomplish his own interpersonal goals during an encounter while maintaining the face and line of his fellow interactants within the constraints of the situation" (p 198).

Wiemann defined his five components of CC in terms of behavioural cues associated with each component. Table 1 provides a summary of the five components of CC and the behavioural cues associated with them.

Table 1

Summary of behavioural cues associated with communicative competence components

Cue	Component of Competence				Behavioral Flexibility
	Interaction Management	Empathy	Affiliation / Support	Social Relaxation	
eye behavior	x		x		
speech choice marking relationships			x		x
head nods	x		x		
speech rate / speaking time			x	x	
smiling			x		
"owning" of one's behavior			x		
proximity			x		
relaxation cues (e.g., leaning)				x	
speech disturbances				x	
object manipulations				x	
reciprocity of affect displays		x	x		
verbal immediacy		x			x
perceived active listening (indicated by reinforcers, etc.)		x	x		
speaker interruptions	x				
"smooth" interchanges	x				
gesticulations	x				
self-manipulations	x			x	
pauses	x				
topic control	x				

adapted from Wiemann (1977, p. 200)

2.1.3 Canale and Swain's Model of CC

In 1980, Canale and Swain introduced a conceptual framework for CC, which encompasses four primary elements: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic

competence. Grammatical competence pertains to the acquisition of grammar rules and vocabulary, while sociolinguistic competence encompasses the understanding of social norms and appropriateness in language usage. Discourse competence is associated with the organization and structure of conversations or written texts, whereas strategic competence denotes the capacity to employ communication strategies in order to surmount obstacles or accomplish objectives (pp. 29-31).

2.1.4 Bachman's Communicative Language Ability Model

Bachman's model of communicative language ability was proposed in 1990 as a comprehensive framework for assessing language proficiency across various contexts and purposes. The model encompasses three key components: language competence, strategic competence, and psychophysiological mechanisms:

1. Language competence has two main components: organizational competence and pragmatic competence. Organizational competence comprises grammatical and textual competence, while pragmatic competence includes illocutionary and sociolinguistic competence.
2. Strategic competence is the language user's ability to connect linguistic competence with his knowledge structures and the contextual cues that influence communication. Strategic competence encompasses the assessment, planning, and execution functions involved in identifying the most optimal strategies for attaining a desired communicative objective.
3. Psychophysiological mechanisms refer to the specific sensory channels (auditory, visual) and modes (receptive, productive) via which competence is executed. (pp. 107-108)

These models provide different perspectives on communicative competence, highlighting the multifaceted nature of language use in various contexts. The researchers will adopt Weimann's model for evaluating the CC of Iraqi EFL students as it is accompanied by a questionnaire whose validity and reliability has already been ensured.

2.2 Previous Studies on Communicative Competence

Communicative competence has been the focus of many research projects which aimed to measure the level of EFL learners' communicative competence, the impact of authentic material on the development of CC, EFL

teachers and students' perception of CC, or the challenges faced by EFL teachers in developing their students' communicative competence. Following is a thematic review of several of these studies.

Tuan (2017) aimed at determining the level of CC of college students at the fourth stage in Vietnam and proposing an English language program for five key universities. The study utilized a descriptive method depending on a communicative competence test to elicit data from the participants. It analyzed the CC of Vietnamese university students in English grammar and discourse, and the results showed that the students had a high level of grammatical competence but a low level of discourse competence; this was ascribed to the low exposure to English language. There was no significant difference between male and female respondents in both grammatical competence and CC. The study recommended creating an enhanced English language communication program, using computer-aided and animated audio and visual presentations, providing more English language exposure, and adopting a policy on no code switching.

A study by Nazari (2007) tried to connect the concepts of Chomsky (1965) and Hymes (1972) on competence to those of Dubin (1989) on autonomy and ideology in communication. The aim of the study was to explore "how the teachers' views on communicative competence are realized in practice" (p. 204). The study's interviews with EFL educators at the secondary level supported the hypothesis that some educators have a fuzzy conception of CC, one that shifts back and forth between autonomous and ideological notions. Based on classroom observations, this study hypothesized that high school EFL teachers will benefit from training that emphasizes both the autonomous and ideological conceptions of CC. Therefore, high school EFL educators may reconsider their pedagogical assumptions and methods, and be better equipped to build their courses on a more nuanced understanding of students' communicative abilities.

Another study investigated how EFL teachers perceive Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and how it affected their students' communicative competence. The quantitative data of the study were collected from teachers via the use of a questionnaire. The findings demonstrated that EFL teachers have an understanding of CLT features, its application, and its effect on students' communication abilities. The findings imply that

teachers, despite their openness to new ideas and eagerness to utilise CLT, are pessimistic about the widespread adoption of CLT due to the difficulties they face in EFL classroom. These difficulties include, but are not limited to, students' low levels of proficiency, teachers' limited resources, and large classes. Teachers think that they will only reap the benefits of CLT if they are able to overcome the challenges and create more favorable environment for its implementation. (Farooq, 2015)

This study aimed to determine whether or not pre-university students in Turkey have different perspectives on the importance of developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in English language classrooms based on demographic variables, like gender, motivation for learning English, proficiency in English, intended field of study, and language of instruction. Seven universities' preparatory schools were included in the research, including Anadolu, Akdeniz, Ataturk, Canakkale Onsekiz Mart, Istanbul, Karadeniz Technical, and Middle East Technical University. The data were collected through the use of rating questions, Likert-scale items, and a number of demographic questions. According to the findings, students have generally good attitudes about studying ICC, and there is little to no difference in students' views toward learning ICC based on gender, competence levels, or medium of instruction. However, those majoring in the social sciences were more likely to see ICC education favorably. The motivational styles of the students studying English also contributed to the development of their perspectives. Students' views about acquiring ICC skills improved in direct proportion to the strength of their integrative and personal drive to do so. However, an inverse relationship was found between students' instrumental drive and their outlook. Participants' comments suggested that most students wanted to learn about all facets of culture, albeit in a conversational setting. When asked about ways to provide cultural content in English class, students overwhelmingly favored watching films and documentaries. (Güven, 2015).

Fang (2010) examined the importance of and the potential for fostering the communicative competence of students in College English Teaching (CET), as well as the benefits and difficulties associated with using Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in CET. Students' perceptions of how they are taught and what they are taught to help them develop their CC were

explored via the use of a questionnaire. This research also addressed the subject of prospective reform based on present CET in China, and recommended introducing a communicative teaching strategy in Chinese institutions, as it seemed the ideal time to do so.

The research by Gilmore (2011) presented the findings of a longitudinal, quasi-experimental examination of the implementation of real material in a Japanese EFL classroom over the course of 10 months. Overall communicative ability was measured before and after treatment for 62 second-year college students who were randomly allocated to either a control group receiving textbook input or an experimental group getting real input. The concept of CC was evaluated through the use of a battery of eight different tests, which included a listening exam, a pronunciation test, a C-test, a grammar test, a vocabulary test, a discourse completion task, an oral interview, and a student-student role-play. The findings showed that the experimental group did better than the control group on five of the eight measures, indicating that the genuine materials and their accompanying activities were more successful than the textbook materials in building a wider variety of communicative abilities in learners.

Saleh (2013) discussed the challenges of achieving CC in foreign language contexts. The conventional model of CC based on native speaker norms was criticized for non-native contexts. Saleh, therefore, suggested reconceptualizing the term in local standards to establish feasible objectives for language teaching and learning. He also discussed the factors which contribute to learners' failure to develop their CC. He concluded that the failure is ascribed to the low foreign language proficiency of both teachers and learners, the adoption of traditional methods of teaching, the unavailability of language oral practice, and the lack of opportunities for learners to interact with native speakers.

Losada, Insuasty and Osorio (2017) analysed the effect of implementing authentic materials and tasks on the development of students' communicative competence in an A2 level English course in a Colombian language school. The study used a mixed research design, including pre and post-tests, observations, interviews, surveys, and diaries. The findings revealed that the use of authentic materials and tasks had a positive impact on the CC of the students and the teaching methods of the experimental group teacher. The article provides insights

into the use of authentic materials and tasks in foreign language teaching and learning contexts.

The goal of a research by Jeong (2018) was to scrutinize whether the application of multimedia in language teaching can help EFL learners improve their communicative competence. To this end, this research first defined CC and then illustrated how the incorporation of language material enhanced with multimedia can help EFL learners at the university level improve their CC and their language skills. This research found that providing EFL students with multimedia-based materials and classroom activities increased their motivation to learn English and gave them a more positive, self-directed learning experience.

Keshmirshakan (2019) examined how exposure to authentic materials can help EFL students in Iran promote their CC. To fulfil the study objective, 106 students with upper-intermediate level were randomly split into two groups, the experimental group and the control group. The students' level of CC was determined prior to the course. After the course, the level of the students' communicative competence was reevaluated for both groups. The results showed that the experimental group witnessed a significant improvement in their CC. In other words, the application of authentic materials in the EFL classroom was shown to significantly increase students' communication skills.

Ibna Seraj and Hadina (2021) published a review article which aimed to provide a critical overview of current research on topics like the factors instigating poor oral performance among EFL learners and the teaching and assessment methods of oral English communication skills (OECSs) for developing OECSs among tertiary level learners in EFL contexts. To this end, 51 empirical papers were evaluated out of a total of 2907 that were gathered from SpringerLink, SCOPUS, Web of Science, and the Google Scholar database and published in a variety of EFL settings between 2010 and 2019. Using NVIVO 12 for thematic analysis and Mendeley for reference management, this research was conducted in accordance with "the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA)" criteria (p. 229). Non-empirical research and those done in native English environments were also disqualified from inclusion in this analysis. The results demonstrated that the environment had a crucial role in the underachievement of OECS by EFL students. In many EFL settings, the use

of technology to teach and evaluate students' OECSs is on the rise.

Previous research about CC focused mainly on the role of authentic material in improving EFL learners' CC and on the perception of teachers and students of the significance of CC. The present study is distinct from previous research as it focuses on measuring the level of Iraqi EFL students' CC and its relation to the variables of gender, age and affiliation.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 The Participants:

The study was conducted on 509 Iraqi Arab EFL students at the tertiary level who belong to six different Iraqi universities, namely Al-Iraqia University (n=243; females=243, males=0) Al-Salam University College (n=93; females=55, males=38), Tikrit University (n=72; females=28, males=44), University of Anbar (n=54; females=27, males=27), University of Baghdad (n=36; females=27, males=27) and University of Thi-Qar (n=11; females=10, males=1). The participants have an age range 18 to 37 as they belong to both morning and evening classes. All the participants have Arabic language as their mother tongue, and they are majoring in English Language and Literature. Moreover, the participants come from different Iraqi governorates as the geographical distribution of the universities shows. This was done to ensure that the sample covers as much as possible of Iraqi EFL students' population.

3.2 Data Collection

The participants in the study were given a questionnaire to fill out, and their responses were used to compile the data for the study. The questionnaire was adopted from Wiemann (1977) and prepared on a Google Form prior to sharing it with the study participants. The questionnaire consists of 36 items, seven of which are about competence in general (labelled *General Competence*) (items 1, 5, 6, 9, 20, 23, 34), and the remaining items are about the five components of communicative competence, namely *Behavioral Flexibility* (items 2, 3, 19, 31, 36), *Affiliation/Support* (items 7, 8, 18, 24, 30, 33), *Empathy* (items 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 22), *Social Relaxation* (items 16, 26, 29, 32, 35) and *Interaction Management* (items 4, 11, 21, 25, 27, 28). As Table 2 shows, the data have a

good level of reliability, $\alpha = 0.884$, according to Cronbach's test of reliability.

Table 2

Reliability test of the study data

Cronbach's α	
scale	0.884

3.3 Data Analysis

To seek answers to the research questions, the researchers performed both descriptive statistics and inferential statistics analyses using jamovi app, version 2.3 (Fox and Weisberg, 2020; R Core Team, 2021; The jamovi project, 2022). The responses to the questionnaire items were analyzed and compared on the basis of different variables, namely the gender, affiliation and age of the participants. To examine the effect of the independent variables on the participants' communicative competence, the researchers divided the participants into two groups (males and females) based on gender, six groups based on affiliation, and four groups (18-21, 22-26, 27-32, 33-37) based on age. Responses to the items which were stated negatively in the questionnaire were reversed before being computed in order to ensure that a high score indicates a high level of communicative competence.

4. RESULTS

The descriptive statistics of the participants' responses to the items of the questionnaire related to General Competence indicated that the majority of the participants, (72.69%), have a medium level of general competence, (26.13%) have a high level of CC and only 1.18% have a low level of CC. These results suggest that EFL learners generally enjoy a medium level of communicative competence. However, examining the five facets of CC individually revealed that the majority of the participants (68.57%) have a medium level of empathy, while almost half of them have a medium level (47.74%, 45.38%, 50.29% and 57.56% respectively) and half of them have a high level (46.95%, 50.49%, 43.03% and 39.69% respectively) of behavioral flexibility, affiliation/support, social relaxation and interaction management (Table 3).

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics of the Participants' Level of Communicative Competence

Competence Components	# of Items	Level of competence	Count	% of Total	Minimum	Maximum
General competence	7	Low	6	1.18	7	16
		Medium	370	72.69	18	37
		High	133	26.13	38	49
Behavioral flexibility	5	Low	27	5.31	6	14
		Medium	243	47.74	15	24
		High	239	46.95	25	35
Affiliation / Support	6	Low	21	4.13	9	17
		Medium	231	45.38	18	29
		High	257	50.49	30	42
Empathy	7	Low	2	0.39	13	13
		Medium	349	68.57	18	37
		High	158	31.04	38	49
Social relaxation	5	Low	34	6.68	5	14
		Medium	256	50.29	15	24
		High	219	43.03	25	35
Interaction management	6	Low	14	2.75	6	17
		Medium	293	57.56	18	29
		High	202	39.69	30	42

One of the aims of this research is to examine whether or not there is a statistically significant difference in CC between male and female Iraqi EFL students. Independent samples t-test assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were checked using Shapiro – Wilk statistics and Levene's test before the analysis was carried out. The assumption of normality was not met, as indicated by the Shapiro – Wilk test findings of $W= 0.99$, $p = 0.002$. Thus, instead of using an independent samples t-test, a Mann – Whitney U test was used. The Mann – Whitney U test (Table 4) showed that there was no statistically significant difference between male students (Median = 4.82, $n = 110$) and female students (Median = 4.78, $n = 399$), $U = 21753$, $p = 0.88$, $r = 0.008$ in their level of CC.

Table 4

Mann-Whitney U Test of the Participants' Communicative Competence Based on Gender

Group	N	Median	Mann-Whitney U test			Shapiro-Wilk test	
			U	P	r	W	p
Male	110	4.82	21753	0.888	0.008	0.99	0.002
Female	399	4.78					

Moreover, the Kruskal-Wallis H-test was used as an alternative to one-way ANOVA. to assess the effect of affiliation on the respondents' communicative competence, because the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance were violated according to the results of the Shapiro-Wilk test ($W = 0.984$, $p = < 0.001$) and Levene's test ($F (9) = 2.76$, $p = .003$). The result of

Kruskal-Wallis H-test revealed that the affiliation of Iraqi EFL learners led to a statistically significant difference only in the Empathy component of COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE, $\chi^2 (5, N = 509) = 15.5, p = 0.008$. The study's impact magnitude is relatively modest ($\epsilon^2 = 0.031$) (Table 5).

Table 5
Kruskal-Wallis H Test of Students' Communicative Competence by Affiliation (University)

Communicative competence components	χ^2	df	p	ϵ^2
All	9.79	5	0.081	0.019
GC-Mean	3.83	5	0.574	0.008
BF-Mean	6.9	5	0.228	0.014
A/S-Mean	10.9	5	0.053	0.021
E-Mean	15.5	5	0.008*	0.031
SR-Mean	8.13	5	0.149	0.016
IM-Mean	9.83	5	0.08	0.019

The researchers ran another Kruskal-Wallis H-test as an alternative to one-way ANOVA to scrutinize the effect of age on the CC of the participants because the assumption of normality was violated according to the results of the Shapiro-Wilk test ($W = 0.989, p < .001$). The results of Kruskal-Wallis H-test revealed that the age of Iraqi EFL learners had a statistically significant effect on the CC, $\chi^2 (3, N = 509) = 9.74, p = 0.021$. The findings of this research indicated a marginally significant effect ($\epsilon^2 = 0.019$). Nevertheless, tested individually, amongst the five facets of CC, two facets (A/S, $\chi^2 (3, N = 509) = 6.3, p = 0.098$ and E, $\chi^2 (3, N = 509) = 1.42, p = 0.7$ respectively) did not display any statistically significant difference based on age groups (Table 6).

Table 6
Kruskal-Wallis H Test of Students' Communicative Competence by Age Groups

Communicative competence components	χ^2	df	p	ϵ^2
All	9.74	3	0.021*	0.019
GC-Mean	10.64	3	0.014*	0.021
BF-Mean	8.4	3	0.038*	0.017
A/S-Mean	6.3	3	0.098	0.012
E-Mean	1.42	3	0.7	0.003
SR-Mean	9.99	3	0.019*	0.02
IM-Mean	11.46	3	0.009*	0.023

Another aim of the present study is to delineate whether the five components of communicative competence are significantly correlated. The results of Spearman correlation indicated that there is a significant positive correlation between all the five components of

communicative competence at .001. As the data in Table 7 show, most of the relationships between the communicative competence components are moderate. However, the relationship between BF and IM is weak, and the relationship between A/S and SR is strong.

Table 7
Spearman's Correlation Matrix of the Five Components of Communicative Competence

	BF	A/S	E	SR	IM
BF					
A/S	0.532***				
E	0.542***	0.534***			
SR	0.495***	0.631***	0.457***		
IM	0.376***	0.556***	0.424***	0.437***	

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

5. DISCUSSION

Seeking answers to the research questions set in this study, the researchers ran a handful of statistical analyses. In accordance with the five research inquiries presented, this section endeavors to explicate and assess the results obtained from the aforementioned studies.

1. Iraqi EFL students' communicative competence level:

According to descriptive statistics derived from the responses to a questionnaire, the majority of Iraqi EFL students are at the intermediate CC level. The researchers did not find any study that determines the level of CC in the Arab world. According to Tuan (2017), one study in Vietnam found that Vietnamese EFL learners possessed proficient grammatical knowledge but inadequate CC abilities. Tuan ascribed this to the poor exposure to English language. Similarly, the researchers of the current study believe that the insufficient exposure to authentic materials is the reason for the moderate level of CC which Iraqi EFL learners enjoy. The significance of authentic material in developing EFL learners' communicative competence has been emphasized by many scholars. For instance, Gilmore's (2011) study revealed that the use of authentic material accompanied by activities was more successful than the textbook in fostering the CC of Japanese learners of English. Students' communicative competence improved when they were exposed to authentic materials and tasks, as shown by the research of Losada, Insuasty, and Osorio (2017). Jeong (2018) found that providing EFL learners with authentic

multimedia-enhanced classroom activities increased their motivation to learn English and gave them a more positive, self-directed learning experience. Keshmirshakan (2019) found that instructors who utilized authentic materials significantly enhanced the linguistic proficiency of Iranian students.

2. Gender effect on CC:

The present study has shown that gender is not a crucial factor in determining the level of CC of Iraqi EFL learners. This finding is in line with Güven (2015) who found that there was little to no difference in students' views toward learning intercultural CC based on gender. Similarly, Tuan (2017) found no significant differences in grammatical competence or CC between male and female respondents. Agbatogun (2014) found that gender did not contribute significantly to the prediction of ESL learners' CC. Kazemian et al. (2021) demonstrated that gender has no any role in using intercultural CC in the writing of Iranian advanced EFL learners.

3. Affiliation effect on CC:

The researchers evaluated the connection between the affiliation (learning environment) of the participants and their CC, and the study's findings suggest that affiliation has no influence on the EFL learners' communicative competence except in one facets of CC, namely empathy. However, Ibna Seraj and Hadina (2021) reviewed 51 empirical papers published in well-known databases to assess the reasons behind the low oral proficiency of EFL learners, and they found that the environment contributes much to the poorness of EFL learners' oral performance. In contrast to prior investigations, the present study places particular emphasis on the environmental role, which could reveal that the academic environments of the Iraqi universities to which the participants of the study are affiliated are virtually identical. That is to say, these universities follow similar systems of teaching, have similar facilities and provide similar amounts of exposure to authentic materials of English language. Subsequently, the learning environment is almost the same in all of them.

4. Age effect on CC:

A statistically significant difference in CC exists between the four age categories of the participants, with the elderly faring better, according to the ANOVA results (Table 6). Descriptive analysis revealed that the mean CC score of individuals increased linearly with age. In their investigation of 578 Korean dental hygiene majors, Kim

and Kim (2013) identified statistically significant differences in CC based on age and other variables. Similarly, Santos et al. (2019) investigated the level of interpersonal communication competence (ICC) among nursing students enrolled in six universities in Brazil. The researchers also sought to establish a correlation between ICC and demographic and educational variables. It was demonstrated that the overall score on the ICC Scale varied considerably according to a number of variables, including age. Given the propensity for social interaction within Arab culture, it is plausible to posit that the superior communicative competence of older Iraqi students can be attributed to their greater familiarity with the social aspects of communication, which constitute the fundamental basis of such competence, in comparison to their younger counterparts.

Feghali (1997) posits that Arabian culture exhibits collectivist tendencies, as evidenced by its emphasis on mutual interdependence and the significance attributed to "behaviors which enhance social relations are crucial" (p. 353).

5. Correlation between CC components:

The findings from the Spearman correlation matrix indicate that the five CC facets are significantly correlated to each other positively and most of the correlations are moderate. These findings are substantially corroborated by Wiemann's (1977) research. Wiemann examined the correlation of IM to competence and its other components and he detected that the correlation was positive and strong, which means that the components are highly interrelated. The moderate correlation among the communicative competence components in the present study can be interpreted by assuming that most of the cues which define the components of communicative competence vary from one culture to another. Therefore, the cues used by Wiemann to describe the five components of communicative competence were derived from western culture and are not necessarily applicable to Arab culture. Moreover, Berger (1977) claimed that there is a close correlation between communicative competence and communicator style, so that judgments of competence stem from variations in communicator style. A good number of studies (Zaharna, 1995; Feghali, 1997; Ayish, 2003) have shown that Arabs possess communication styles different than those possessed by Westerners. Consequently, Arabs' perception of communicative competence necessarily differs from the perception of

Westerners. This claim is reinforced by Zaharna (1995) who discussed differences in the communication preferences of Arabs and Americans and contended that:

For the Arab culture, language appears to be a social tool used in the weaving of society. Emphasis is on form over function, affect over accuracy, and image over meaning. Accordingly, content may be less important than the social chemistry a message creates (p 253).

6. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to evaluate the CC of Iraqi students majoring in EFL who were enrolled in different Iraqi universities. The data analysis showed that these students, generally speaking, have a medium level of CC, which might be ascribed to the insufficient exposure to authentic materials in Iraqi universities EFL classes. Besides, the study has found that the CC of Iraqi EFL students was influenced moderately by their age, but not by their gender and their affiliation. These results echo findings from research conducted worldwide. The researchers recommend that Iraqi universities should adopt a teaching system which emphasizes the communicative aspects of the English language by exposing students to authentic materials and involving them in activities which motivate them to interact in the target language. Moreover, to improve students' communicative competence, the social and cultural facets of English language should be given sufficient attention in the classroom as there are significant cultural differences between Arabs and Westerners, as relevant research has shown.

The study also found that the five components (*interaction management, empathy, affiliation/support, behavioural flexibility and social relaxation*) that make up CC all have a positive correlation with one another. The pedagogical implication of this finding is that these components contribute all to the development of EFL learners' communicative competence; therefore, educators should give them equal attention when instructing the communicative features of language.

A future study could examine the impact of utilizing authentic material on the CC of Iraqi EFL students, considering the critical role that such materials play in enhancing the CC of EFL learners.

APPENDIX

A Copy of the Study Questionnaire

This questionnaire is to measure the communicative competence of Iraqi university students of English. I would like you to choose the number that best expresses your opinion about each of the following statements. (1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Slightly disagree, (4) Neutral (Neither Agree nor Disagree), (5) Slightly agree (6) Agree, or (7) Strongly Agree. Your efforts are much appreciated.

#		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neutral (Neither Agree nor Disagree)	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	I find it easy to get along with others.							
2	I can adapt to changing situations.							
3	I treat people as individuals.							
4	I interrupt others too much.							
5	I am "rewarding" to talk to.							
6	I can deal with others effectively.							
7	I am a good listener.							
8	My personal relations are cold and distant.							
9	I am easy to talk to.							
10	I won't argue with someone just to prove I am right.							
11	My conversation behavior is not "smooth."							
12	I ignore other people's feelings.							
13	I generally know how others feel.							
14	I let others know I understand them.							
15	I understand other people.							
16	I am relaxed and comfortable when speaking.							
17	I listen to what people say to me.							
18	I like to be close and personal with people.							
19	I generally know what type of behavior is appropriate in any given situation.							

20	I usually do not make unusual demands on my friends.								
21	I am an effective conversationalist.								
22	I am supportive of others.								
23	I do not mind meeting strangers.								
24	I can easily put myself in another person's shoes.								
25	I pay attention to the conversation.								
26	I am generally relaxed when conversing with a new acquaintance.								
27	I am interested in what others have to say.								
28	I don't follow the conversation very well.								
29	I enjoy social gatherings where I can meet new people.								
30	I am a likeable person.								
31	I am flexible.								
32	I am not afraid to speak with people in authority.								
33	People can come to me with their problems.								
34	I generally say the right thing at the right time.								
35	I like to use my voice and body expressively.								
36	I am sensitive to others' needs of the moment.								

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