

## Challenges of Developing Communicative Competence among Iraqi EFL Undergraduate Student

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### Abstract

Research in the field of English language as a foreign language (EFL) has been consistently highlighting the need for communicative competence skills among students. Accompanied by the validated positive impact of technologies on students' skills', this study aims to explore the strategies used by EFL students in enhancing their communicative competence using digital platforms and identify the factors of developing communicative competence using digital platforms (linguistic factors, environmental factors, psychological factors, and university-related factors). The mixed-method research design was utilized to obtain data from Iraqis undergraduate EFL students. The study was conducted in the Iraqi university in Baghdad Iraq. EFL undergraduate students from the English department from the second-year grade constituted the population of the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 EFL students to explore students' usage of digital platforms to enhance communicative competence. Convenient sampling technique was used to select the students. The data of the interviews were analysed thematically using QSR NVivo software. Also, survey questionnaire was demonstrated to the sample of the study to identify the challenges of developing. 150 EFL students participated in the study sampled using proportional sampling method. SPSS software was also used to analyse the data. The findings showed that students used digital platforms to develop grammar accuracy, pronunciation, vocabulary, cohesion and coherence, punctuation, and spelling. On the other hand, the challenging factors identified are grouped in four categories which are linguistic factors, environmental factors, psychological factors, and university-related factors. The findings of the study offer new insight for future directions research and recommendation to the university management as these findings could be the cornerstones of the planning for successful implementation of digital platforms in teaching and learning English in general and communicative competence in specific.

**Keywords:** Challenges; communicative competence, language learning, language teaching, Iraqi students.

### Introduction

It is undeniable that English is increasingly used as the global lingua franca, and thus is used in almost every domain of communication worldwide. Consequently, the demand for English language skills and English language, as English language professionals are most acutely aware, has exploded (Byram & Golubeva 2020). As a result, learning English apart from the first language or national language is substantially needed nowadays. English is, thus, the most widely taught foreign language at all stages in several countries, including Iraq. It is regarded to be an important subject because English proficiency has become a requirement for both career and further studies. In this regard, amongst the four macro skills, English oral communication ability is seen as crucial and the most important in learning a foreign language (Ur 1996). To help boost Iraqi learners' English-oral communication proficiency, technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) and teaching have been proposed to be used in the English classroom in Iraq during the post-covid19 period. However, it seems that TELL fails to create sufficient opportunities for genuine interaction in the English classroom based on limited interaction between teachers and students and limited usage of digital platforms in learning technologies. Oftentimes, when it is time to speak, most Iraqi students cannot correctly produce the target language (Abdul Razak et al. 2018).

The integration of productive skills (e.g., speaking) is very important for the enhancement of practical communication ability (c). One ability that is required for communication is speaking (Ortiz-Preuss & Rodrigues 2017). Interaction through speaking is useful and creates many benefits for learners and business establishments. For instance, efficient speaking leads to accomplishments through speaking activities during ceremonies, job interviews, and activities for job training. (Almalki 2019) indicated that speaking and communication skills are prioritized over work experience, motivation, and academic accreditation in new employment standards. EFL students not only have a limited opportunity to speak English outside the classroom (Aryani 2019) but also have little opportunity to communicate with English speakers (Boonkit 2010). To address this situation, teachers try to provide students with real-life situations and communicative activities to increase their speaking competency. Many factors need to be considered for bettering students' speaking performance (Boonkit 2010). Such factors include pronunciation, vocabulary, and collocations to enhance students' speaking fluency. Moreover, students' level of confidence leads to better speaking performance (Boonkit 2010). Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich (2010) confirmed that increasing students' self-confidence resulted in reduced fear of making errors, which will allow them to feel more comfortable with the use of the target language. In addition, (Almalki 2019) suggested that enhancing students' speaking ability is achieved through providing them with a variety of course activities and encouraging them to have more exposure to the target language through listening to the media. Students should be required to seek opportunities to speak English in real situations, which may result in promoting their speaking skills and self-confidence (Aryani 2019).

As for the development of communicative competence, the students face many various problems that hinder learners from mastering them; continuously these reasons related to subject choice, non-appropriate use of teaching method, little emphasis on the language instated, non-stated bases of assessment, and colloquial usage during teaching and weakness of linguistic outcome (AlSaleem 2018). Hence, an important question arises; how do English language learners acquire communicative skills? At the same point, many English such as (Almobarraz 2020) started the need to investigate communicative competence skills.

Finally, Subiana, Sukyadi, & Purnawarman (2022) found that EFL students generally perceived the implementation of electronic-speaking portfolios favourably because they helped identify weaker areas in speaking, offered additional oral practice opportunities, alleviated speaking anxiety, archived learning progress, and reinforced peer bonding. On the other hand, the findings indicated two negative criticisms—the absence of face-to-face interaction and the presence of rehearsal opportunities masking the true communicative skills level. In the relevant literature, Tiktok, and boomerangs have been shown to enhance language teaching and learning. For instance, Mabayoje et al. (2016) indicated that technology significantly facilitated computer-mediated communication for language learners since it allowed for personal appearance and individual language variations. Additionally, drawing on a constructivist framework, Dellatola, Daradoumis, & Dimitriadis, (2020) performed an empirical study and revealed that technologies provided opportunities for inquiry-based instruction and supported a cooperative learning environment in which students' ownership was greatly enhanced. Thus, this needs to be investigated.

The role of communicative competence is very important in English language teaching. Achieving communicative competence in a second language involves not only learning the grammatical rules of a language but also learning when, where, and with whom to use the language in a contextually appropriate way. This needs more than knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary; it is about how to use English in communicative situations. Communicative competent person will know how to do things in English, for example purchasing something, selling something, convincing someone and expressing personal feelings. He will also know how to speak formally and informal language styles. Brown (1994) says that communicative language teaching (CLT) allows learners to practice English as it is actually used in a speech community and equips them with the language skills they will need when they leave the classroom for the real world. The teachers should consider the projects that match the rules of CLT while searching for solutions to large class sizes and unmotivated students. Rather to teach a structural syllabus with a preponderance of grammar and vocabulary drills project work should be the focus, which allows students collaborate on tasks that require authentic, relevant and real-life communicative interactions which helps learners to acquire communicative competence in a second language, much as a person learns his or her first language.

## Literature Review

There is a growing number of studies aimed to investigate the reasons behind students' low performance in communicative competence skills. By reviewing the literature, these can be grouped under three categories. First, personal traits such as shyness, fear of facing an audience, self-confidence, and physical appearance. Second, the audience and the instructor were believed to be the main reasons for students' unwillingness to present in class. Finally, a lack of presentation skills was seen to play a crucial role in students' feelings of anxiety. Over the past two decades, research has demonstrated several challenges encountered by second language (L2) learners concerning their oral language proficiency, and its ultimate negative impact on their success in English-speaking universities. Kim found that an inability or unwillingness to 1) engage in class discussions, 2) communicate with peers who had a different first language (L1), or 3) reply to questions were the three greatest obstacles to achieving academic success (Kim 2018). The study also found that EFL learners experienced difficulties in conveying their opinions fluently in class discussions and responding clearly and consistently to questions directed to them. Eisenhauer (2020) found that EFL students regarded oral presentations, whole-class discussions, and note-taking as the most difficult academic activities, whereas they regarded small-group discussions and class participation as less problematic. Participants also highlighted a lack of confidence in their English speaking and pronunciation abilities. In a final study involving 280 East Asian postgraduate students conducted by (Sydorenko et al. 2018), participants identified leading class discussions and participating in whole-class discussions as the most difficult oral activities. Furthermore, respondents regarded formal oral presentations and listening skills as the most critical aspects of academic success.

All the above identify a clear set of difficulties experienced by EFL learners with regard to their communicative competence skills in non-English-speaking countries like Iraq. However, much of this research is too broadly focused on international students and communicative competence skills in general, and not on the explicit needs of language learners from specific countries where students have no direct exposure to the language. Without research focusing on the needs of a group of students from the same language background or country, it is difficult, if not impossible, to make recommendations for enhancing language education in that country, and in the case of the current study, this focus is on Iraq. For EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, gaining mastery over oral English communication skills is always more challenging than other language skills like reading, listening, and writing. In the Fourth Industrial Revolution era, the demand for oral English communication skills is inevitably increased for the use of IoT as a means of communication globally. The word 'communication' originated from the Latin word 'communicare' (meaning to share), and the French word 'communis' (common) means one's experience sharing with others (Okoro, 2007). Oliver and Philp (2014) defined oral communication as "the speaking and listening that occurs in real-time (i.e., in the present) in communicative exchanges (i.e., interactions)" (p. 5). This kind of exchange depends on the process of meaning-making and understanding of both communicators (Adler & Rodman, 2009). The significance of oral communication skills in mastering a second language was accentuated by Ellis (2003) when he highlighted that second and foreign language acquisition encompasses the ability to use the sound and grammar systems to communicate meanings. Oral communication skills make face-to-face interactions possible, as well as long-distance interactions such as online conversations. In this techno-drenched world, for maintaining online and offline communication, EFL learners need to be skilled in oral communication including various vital aspects. In today's global context, they often need oral English communication skills for expressing opinions, making arguments, offering explanations, transmitting information, and making impressions upon others in their personal lives, future workplaces, social interactions, and political endeavors (Rahman, 2010). Moreover, it has become an aphorism in EFL contexts that a graduate with a good command of oral English communication skills has a better opportunity in their professional life than one who does not (Idrus, 2016).

## Methodology

This study used mixed-method research design to investigate the phenomena. The sample of the study are Iraqi EFL undergraduate students from the English department. The study was conducted in the Iraqi university in Baghdad city. 10 undergraduate students were conveniently sampled to participate in semi-structured interview. While 150 students participated in the study to answer the questionnaire. The students were sampled using

stratified random sampling. The adopted survey was piloted to the students before demonstrating. Two experts from English language teaching participated in validating the reliability of the questionnaire. The data was analysed descriptively and inferentially using NVivo QSR and SPSS software.

### Findings and Discussion

The findings of the students' interviews are reported in the following sections. In-depth interview data for the eight participants were analysed thematically to identify emerging patterns and themes. The themes were systematically rearranged as per the thematic structure. A strong theme across all interviews was that interviewees shared similar feedback and the most notable theme was the significance and positive impact of digital platforms on students' communication skills. The participants' audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed to assign themes and coding. Finally, during the coding process, the topics were extracted inductively from the results. The main themes that emerged from the interview were as follows increase grammar accuracy, enhance pronunciation levels, learn new vocabulary, improve cohesion and coherence which includes learning tenses, enhance punctuation, learn intonation and rhythm, recognise different text types, and improve spelling. The quotes from the interviews will be reported in detail in the following sections.

#### Grammar Accuracy

The student reported on the accuracy of the grammar aspect in communication stating that he needs to think of the correct grammar to use before speaking. However, having no time to think while speaking, he ends up making grammatical mistakes.

*I always think of the grammar items involved before I speak and when I have no time to think I will make mistakes and I feel embarrassed but now I can practice by recording myself and listening again to check my mistakes and train myself to use complex sentences with no mistakes. [Student 3, transcribe C, 1/4/2023]*

This quotation indicates that digital platforms can improve students' grammar competency in terms of sentence forming and sentence types as they are required to form compound and complex sentences at the undergraduate level to pass their writing exam. With the use of digital platforms, students can increase their grammar skills. So, they can address their speech difficulty, learn to speak properly and think before they engage in actual conversation online. This implies that students are given enough time to repair their own speech faults may it be in pronunciation, words or phrases thus increasing their grammar competency.

In accordance student 8 stated:

*"With access to digital platforms greater than ever, using them to improve English grammar in learning how to compose compound and complex sentences where I can use websites to write and check my use of correct sentence composition independently" [Student 8, transcribe H, 1/2/2022].*

*With the aid of technology, I can properly use prepositions as it always confused me which to use with days and months. Now I can practice the usage online and do tests. [Student 8, transcribe H, 1/2/2022].*

*"I can also learn grammar by practising the utilization of coordinations and conjunctions instead of memorizing as digital platforms provide practical examples of coordinations and conjunctions and their correct usage" [Student 8, transcribe H, 1/2/2022].*

The participants also reported on learning how to use correct tenses using digital platforms and correct grammar mistakes that students tend to make in their written production. This was said by student 3 in the focus group discussion 7

*We have always had problems in distinguishing language tenses as I don't practice speaking, I used to memorise tense formation only, but using digital platforms I can practice them and learn more about using tenses by watching live conversation videos in movies. ()*

While writing their compositions, learners mainly locate events along a timeline by means of verb tenses. However, failing to provide the right tense may distort the meaning of their written compositions. These mistakes can be considered semantic mistakes as they are related to the meaning of the word in context. The availability of

digital platforms and websites enables students to practice writing with auto-feedback to help them produce better grammar in writing. The students reported many useful approaches to using digital platforms to enhance students learning of tenses, where the students, through the use of digital platforms will have direct exposure to use correct tenses through writing grammatical sentences to be assessed by the digital platform's software such as Grammarly.

The spoken language is more flexible than the written language in the textbook as it includes some redundancy in speaking where the speaker can repeat the same idea with different forms of words and grammatical structures. Student 1 highlighted the theme by saying:

*"I learn more grammar from listening than from writing, in Talk Shows or Podcast, the speakers repeat the same sentence or idea with different words and tenses and hence I can learn new words and how to use multiple grammars in speaking." [Student 1, transcribe A, ]*

Based on the result of the interview above, the researcher can conclude that some elements can enhance students' listening skills. Digital platforms enhance their learning of intonation and rhythm, the differences between formal and informal languages, understanding the reduced speech, communication functions of language, and recognising meaning according to different grammatical forms.

#### Pronunciation

The majority of the students reported that in the Iraqi EFL context that exposure to practice speaking and listening to English is very low. Therefore, the correct pronunciation is a major issue for the students. In the Iraqi context, there is no specific accent followed and students will end up pronouncing words wrongly. The students also lack knowledge of the different accents between American and British accents. However, the use of digital platforms to learn pronunciation.

*....I always used to be confused about the pronunciation of some words, when I learn new vocabulary, I pronounce them wrongly, especially in the stressed syllabus or parts of the words. Now I can easily check the pronunciation online and also I learn the pronunciation in American and British accents.*

Also, student 4 in focus group discussion 2 mentioned that using his iPhone Siri has helped him improve his pronunciation by talking to his phone saying that:

*"Not to mention, Siri is available 24/7, so you can practice speaking anytime you get an urge. If you don't have Siri because you have another type of smartphone, you can use whatever digital voice assistant that's on your phone instead."*

Another way to enhance your pronunciation is to listen to podcasts and audiobooks that cover topics of their interest and expose them to different styles and perspectives of communication. It was validated in the literature that podcasts and audiobooks can help students improve their listening comprehension, vocabulary, pronunciation, and critical thinking skills. This finding was found in many of the students' responses such as student 5 in focus group discussion 8 saying that

*"I used to learn from the hosts and guests, who are often experts, influencers, or storytellers, and observe how they use their voice, words pronunciation, tone, and language to engage their audience which also helps me improve my listening skills.*

It can be seen that digital platforms play a key role in enhancing students' pronunciation by listening to podcasts and watching tv talks such as ted talks. Also, with their constant usage daily, students can use their digital gadgets such as iPhones to converse with Siri and check on the correct pronunciation of selected words. Finally, the students highlighted the fact that digital platform aid students improve the most challenging and difficult task in pronunciation which is the stressed syllabus.

Intonation and pronunciation are one of the main challenges in developing listening skills due to the lack of exposure to the language from native speakers. Students 2 and 4 highlighted this issue by stating:

*"My English is pretty good but when I try to speak I don't know where to stop or stress. I think even my teacher has the same issue, when I try to speak it sounds so different from native speakers. However, my teachers*

*introduced us to some YouTube channels and websites to learn and check out pronunciations focusing the most on intonation”.*

#### Vocabulary

Vocabulary is the building block of a language. Thus, it is heartening to discover that the learners in this study managed to enhance their vocabulary knowledge and consequently develop their language skills. In learning any of the language skills, especially in communicative competition students encounter difficulties in learning new vocabulary. However, vocabulary is needed the most in learning speaking skills as speaking requires an extensive amount of vocabulary.

*The benefits obtained of using the online applications are knowing the meaning of new vocabularies and how to use them in the conversations.”*

*“My teacher always asks us to memorise the new vocabulary in the texts from the textbook in the traditional way, now I learn in more fun ways online by playing vocabulary games online.”*

*“From this blogger, I think, I can improve my vocabulary in English, because when I do a comment, I must find the meaning of words.”*

In addition, student 1 in focus group discussion 7 mentioned that:

*“To translate this information I use many ways, for example, I use a dictionary, www.cit cat.com and an electronic dictionary. Then, I write in my blog after I translate from Arabic to English”*

*“Applications that allow playing vocabulary games. These games can include crossword puzzles and many other ingenious and entertaining ways to have fun which I use to learn different kinds of vocabularies such as political, medical, and engineering words.”*

*“There are digital platforms that show the relationship between different words in a text. These include programs like Wordle, which is an online application. This software allows the creation of word clouds from text that can be manipulated. Another similar tool is Wordsift, also available online.”*

*Tools that create digital vocabulary field trips. The most common program for this teaching approach is TrackStar. This program is available free on the Internet. With this software, you can collect different websites to create a vocabulary field trip;*

Quoting student 6:

*“We also learn new vocabularies from the textbooks in the classroom but we forget them because they are not related to daily life vocabs but when I read online, I learn more interesting words about makeup and fashion.”*

In the above quotes, the students have commented mostly on the role of digital platforms in terms of websites and applications in enhancing vocabulary competence. The students highlighted that online reading enhances their vocabulary drastically as they will be exposed more to texts on topics they are interested in learning about.

#### Cohesion and Coherence

Coherence and cohesion are related writing features that signal connection across a text explicitly or implicitly while cohesion refers to the linguistic cues in a text, such as connectives, repetition, or references. It has been mentioned in the literature on the role of digital platforms in enhancing linguistic competence that cohesion and coherence is the least to be learned in digital platforms as it requires high artificial intelligence and interference of human factor. However, the past two decades have seen the development and popularity of modern applications such as automated writing evaluation (AWE) systems in second-language writing courses.

*“There are several applications such as Coh-Metrix which is available for the automatic measurement, including 29 features of connectives, referential cohesion, and latent semantic analysis (LSA).*

Although it is difficult to find a digital platform designed especially to enhance students’ coherence and cohesion in writing or speaking, students mentioned that

### Punctuation

Leveraging digital platforms such as writing tools empower individuals to overcome challenges associated with punctuation ensuring clear and polished written communication.

*"I feel comfortable using digital writing tools to learn to enhance my knowledge of punctuations, as the curricula are designed to teach it theoretically. However, there are special websites to train on how to use punctuations in contexts". [Student 1, transcribe A, ]*

Also, students believe that digital platforms enhance students' writing through peer learning where the students can write together and receive feedback from each other. Moreover, the students can practice writing online to learn how to make meaningful use of punctuation to maintain coherence and cohesion in writing. Furthermore, grammar, which has been reported as the major barrier to speaking the correct language, could be learned in an enjoyable way with the help of digital platforms. Lastly, students reported that students will be able to revise their work and check the text they have written.

### Spelling

The majority of the students mentioned that online reading materials enabled them to enhance their knowledge of spelling. Quoting students 1:

*"I know how to say many words I hear from movies or songs but I don't know how to spell them, it is easier now to read online, there website where I can say the word and will get the spelling. Also, by reading online, I feel I'm exposed to more words as I read about the things I like not the tests included in my textbook." [Student 1, transcribe A, 1/2/2020]*

Learning correct spelling is also one of the main issues highlighted by students as Student 4 mentioned

*"When I write online or use a laptop or my phone, I have installed the Grammarly software which will give me immediate correction when I spell the words wrongly, and that helps me so much to avoid that mistake again and learn how to write better". [Student 4, transcribe D, 1/2/202]*

In sum, the students believe that digital platforms are one of the best ways to improve their communicative linguistic and discourse competence. The interview findings showed that digital platforms improve their communication skills in terms of grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, cohesion and coherence. In addition, in terms of writing skills, digital platforms improved their tenses, spelling, collaboration and punctuation. Furthermore, regarding listening skills, digital platforms improve their intonation and rhythm, understand reduced speech, and communication functions, and recognise meaning from different grammatical forms. Finally, the students mentioned that digital platforms improve their understanding of different text types, reading speed and comprehension, text background, and learning new vocabulary.

### Factors of Developing Communicative Competence

This research question investigates the factors behind students' low proficiency in communicative skills. To do so, quantitative research method was used by demonstrating a survey questionnaire to second-year students at the Iraqi university. Four types of factors were investigated namely linguistic factors, psychological factors, environment factors, and university-related factors. This section starts by describing the response rate of surveyed respondents and the demographic information of the students.

To identify the characteristics of the respondents, descriptive and frequency analyses were carried out. The profile of respondents includes gender and age which are illustrated in Table 1. According to Sekaran & Bougie (2016), the purpose of conducting the descriptive and frequency analysis is to observe the number of different respondents with different values that can be represented by the percentage rate. Thus, in this study, out of the total respondents, 56.7 % of them are male respondents while 43.3 % are female. Most of the respondents are between 20-and 21 years old 82 (54.7%), followed by the respondents are 19-20 years old respondents 68 (45.3%). The respondents prefer Technology-enhanced teaching styles with an average of 80% while the conventional style of teaching is 20%. Technology-enhanced learning refers to the mode of teaching that is known as remote learning while conventional learning refers to the traditional model of language learning (face to face). The technical

characteristics of the respondents showed that about 54.7% of respondents owned 2 electronic gadgets for personal use (mobile phone, PC/ laptop, tablet), 45.3% owned 3 electronic gadgets. In terms of formal digital platforms education, 90% of respondents had no formal digital platforms education while only 10% had digital platforms training at school. 82% of students engaged in digital platforms in their learning practices.

**Table 1 Personal characteristics of students**

Demographic	Items	F (N=150)	Percent %
Gender	Male	85	56.7
	Female	65	43.3
Age	21-22	82	54.7
	19-20	68	45.3
	Above 18	0	00
Which mode do you like your teacher to use in teaching	Conventional (Teacher-centred)	30	20.0
	Technology-enhanced teaching style	120	80.0
Gadget owned (phone, PC/ laptop, tablet)	2	82	54.7
	3	68	45.3
	4	00	00
	Total	150	100.
Have you had any formal digital platforms for education	Yes	30	20.0
	No	120	80.0
Engaged in using digital platforms in your learning	Yes	115	82
	No	35	18
	Total	150	100.0

**a. Students' exposure to digital platforms**

Table 4.6 shows the time in which students are exposed to digital platforms. As shown in the table, the majority of the students 108 (72%) use mobile phones for more than 8 hrs each day, while 30 (20%) use mobile for 4-8 hours per day. That was followed by another heavy use of digital platforms for online communication purposes 88 (58.7%) and 38 (25.3%) use online communication platforms for 2-4 hours. Also, 76 (50.7%) students surf the internet for more than 8 hours while 42 (28%) surf the web for 4-8 hours per day. 52 (34.7%). students spend 4-8 hours working on a computer/laptop, while 46 (30.7) use a laptop/computer for more than 8 hours per day. For more than 8 hours, 50 (33.3%) students use handheld devices. Therefore, from these findings, we can conclude that most students spend around more than 8 hours per day using digital platforms. With this high level of exposure to digital platforms, students can be categorised as heavy users of digital platforms.

**Table 2. Students' exposure to digital platforms per day**

Items	Valid	Frequency	Per cent
work on computer/ laptop	Less than 1hr	21	16.0
	2-4 hrs	28	20.0
	4-8 hrs	52	34.7
	More than 8 hrs	46	30.7
Surfing the internet	Less than 1hr	0	0
	2-4 hrs	32	21.3
	4-8 hrs	42	28.0
	More than 8 hrs	76	50.7



	Less than 1hr	0	0
Using a mobile phone	2-4 hrs	12	8.0
	4-8 hrs	30	20.0
	More than 8 hrs	108	72.0
Using handheld devices (e.g. MP3, tablets, etc.	Less than 1hr	49	32.7
	2-4 hrs	31	20.7
	4-8 hrs	20	12.0
	More than 8 hrs	50	33.3
Online Communication (email, Facebook)	Less than 1hr	24	16.0
	2-4 hrs	38	25.3
	4-8 hrs	88	58.7
	More than 8 hrs	24	16.0

a. Results of linguistic factors

This section presents the descriptive findings of the factors of developing communicative skills. The first section report on the linguistic factors. The students agree on the items of linguistic factors they face in developing communicative skills total mean of 3.84. This indicates that students agree they are facing linguistic factors in English learning and especially communicative competence. The students highly agreed on “I am not fluently aware of speech rate, spontaneity, and pauses frequency” mean score of 3.93, "I am unable to produce accurate speech parts such as communicative ideas" and “I have limited knowledge in stress intonation” mean score 3.89, "Lack of linguistic grammatical knowledge" mean score 3.84, "I have limited knowledge in terms of vocabulary number" mean score 3.71. Finally, “I have limited knowledge in suprasegmental features of speech” mean score 3.48.

Table 3. Results of linguistic factors

No	Item	SD	MS
1	Lack of linguistic grammatical knowledge	3.44	.944
2	I am unable to produce accurate speech parts such as communicative ideas	3.89	1.204
3	I am not fluently aware of speech rate, spontaneity, and pauses frequency	3.93	.459
4	I have limited knowledge in terms of vocabulary number	3.71	1.272
5	I have limited knowledge in suprasegmental features of speech	3.48	.944
6	I have limited knowledge in stress intonation	3.89	1.204

b. Results of environmental factors

Table below presents the findings of the environmental factors of developing communicative competence among EFL students, the high total mean score indicates that environmental factors impact students' heavily in developing their communicative competence. Based on Table below, the total mean of 3.92 which is categorized as “high” indicates that students face high challenges in developing communicative competence. The students showed high agreement on, “I have limited oral practice environment” mean score of 4.00, “The university have large size of language classroom” (M 3.92), “I have mixed abilities problem” and “My university lacks financial funds” (M 3.91), and “My Arabic language influences our speaking skills” mean score 3.90, “I Lack of exposure to English language and native speakers” In general, it can be seen that students have a high level of basic digital literacy skills and they are able to use digital platforms.

Table 4. Results of environmental factors

No	Item	SD	MS
1	I have limited oral practice environment	4.00	.819
2	The university have large size of language classroom	3.92	.879
3	My Arabic language influences our speaking skills	3.90	.903
4	I Lack of exposure to English language and native speakers	3.87	.914
5	I have mixed abilities problem	3.91	.854
6	My university lacks financial funds	3.91	.854

c. Results of psychological factors

This section presents the results of psychological factors in developing communicative competence. The following table presents the results of the students' responses to the items in the questionnaire. The high total mean score of 4.24 indicates that psychological factors posit high challenges for students to develop their linguistic competence. Students showed high agreements on "I feel reluctant when I speak English language" (M 4.29), "I feel shy when I try to speak English language" (M 4.27), "I have low confidence in speaking English language" (M 4.27), "I have anxiety in speaking in English language" (M 4.19), and "I feel I don't have self-efficacy in speaking English language" mean score 4.18, "I lack emotional support from parents, peers, and teachers" (M 3.17).

Table 5. Findings of psychological factors

No	Item	SD	MS
1	I have anxiety in speaking in English language	4.19	.860
2	I have low confidence in speaking English language	4.27	.835
3	I feel reluctant when I speak English language	4.29	.816
4	I feel shy when I try to speak English language	4.27	.810
5	I feel I don't have self-efficacy in speaking English language	4.18	.844
6	I lack emotional support from parents, peers, and teachers	4.17	.860

d. Findings of university-related factors

The analysis of basic digital literacies is presented in Table 4.28. The total mean of 4.22 which is categorized as "high" indicates that university related factors play key role as a major challenge in developing students' communicative competence. The respondents showed high agreements on, "My university lack access to internet" (M 4.30), "My university lacks proper teaching materials for teaching speaking" (M 4.29), "The infrastructure is inappropriate for technology-based learning" (M 4.23), "My university management is ineffective" (M 4.23), "My university doesn't provide proper training" (M 4.18) "My university doesn't have technical staff" (M 4.17).

Table 6. Results of university-related factors

No	Item	SD	MS
1	My university lack access to internet	4.30	.791
2	The infrastructure is inappropriate for technology-based learning	4.23	1.000
3	My university doesn't have technical staff	4.17	.931
4	My university doesn't provide proper training	4.18	.903
5	My university management is ineffective	4.23	.800
6	My university lacks proper teaching materials for teaching speaking	4.29	.791

**DISCUSSION**

Technology in teaching speaking as what participants detailed above builds confidence. It allows students to boost and build their confidence. It has become a way that students overcome their speaking difficulty in a crowd for technology allows them to practice before the speaking engagement. Using technology in teaching speaking brings a number of positive results on the part of the learners. The findings of this study are in a like manner with that of numerous studies on teaching speaking with the use of technologies of today's modern world. The findings run parallel with (Rakhmanina & Kusumaningrum 2017) which states that learning speaking through technology like video blogging is effective as it promotes students' learning motivation. As well, findings are in conformance with Machmud and Abdulah (2017) which states that using technology like smartphones in teaching speaking overcomes anxiety in speaking English. It revealed that groups of students with high and low anxiety obtained

higher scores when taught using technology like smartphones compared to those who are not. Goh also stated that technology in teaching speaking develops language fluency, accuracy and complexity (Goh 2016). In addition, Rodrigues & Vethamani (2015) find out that there is greater language proficiency and stronger self-confidence amongst learners of English as a second language as they develop their speaking skills. Further, Akkara et al. (2020) described that there is a significant difference in the speaking ability of students when taught speaking using technology such as WhatsApp interaction. It stated that using technology in teaching speaking improves students' speaking fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy and pronunciation. It further explained that there is a change in the perception of students in terms of their speaking skills. Besides, the students also used digital platforms to learn pronunciation skills, fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy. Particularly, the dictionary helped students, first, to listen the native speakers' pronunciation of words and phrases and, then, to listen one's own pronunciation of words and phrases. This practise enabled the students to learn pronunciation and coherence. The dictionary also provides alternative dictions for a certain word or phrase with lots of synonyms and antonyms that enabled the students to develop their lexical resource. Apart from this, since the dictionary has various sentence structures constructed in a certain word or phrase, the students were benefited to increase their grammar and accuracy skills. This study, therefore, revealed that educational speaking technologies could be used to enhance students' speaking performance since using the educational speaking technology tools enables them to practice fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation

This study investigated the factors affect the development of communicative competence skills in terms of grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, coherence, and cohesion. The survey included five types of factors to be investigated that are linguistic factors, environmental factors, psychological factors, and university-related factors. The findings showed that students highly agree on majority of the factors. The results revealed that there were four different types of linguistic factors, e.g., lack of language knowledge, accuracy, fluency, and low vocabulary were responsible for causing EFL learners' poor communicative competence in EFL contexts. According to the results, learners' lack of grammatical knowledge was prominent. When learners spoke, they made mistakes using improper grammar (Chen & Goh 2011; Soomro et al. 2019) The other linguistic factor related to accuracy revealed that learners were unable to produce accurate speech in terms of pronunciation, presentation, and communicating ideas (H. M. Alakrash et al. 2022). Fluency was a linguistic factor related to speech rate, spontaneity, and frequency of pauses that was also responsible for EFL learners' poor oral skills (Ali Alghail & Ali Mahfoodh 2019; Razak et al. 2022). Finally, EFL learners' low vocabulary level was another linguistic factor for hindering the developing oral skills performance (Soomro et al., 2019). Thus, the findings showed that the lack of language knowledge, fluency, accuracy, pronunciation and vocabulary were linguistic problems for developing learners' oral skills. But learners' problems related to the suprasegmental features of speech, especially stress and intonation, were not found. Therefore, the findings of this study would recommend more studies addressing these issues in future research. There were four different types of environmental factors: limited oral practice environment learner passiveness, large class sizes, and learners' mixed abilities. Most of the studies illustrated that limited opportunities to practice oral skills inside and outside the classroom were the prime environmental factor for the poor development of EFL learners' oral skills in EFL contexts (Fitria & Salwa 2018; Ismail et al. 2018). As there was a lack of an oral practice environment in EFL contexts, learners rarely got the opportunity to practice outside the classroom (Soomro et al., 2019). The findings showed that the traditional lecture-based teaching method still existed in the EFL contexts for teaching oral skills. In this method, learners played passive roles in their lessons and this hindered them from developing oral communication skills (Abid 2019; Bruner et al. 2015). Moreover, the findings also showed that EFL learners were not motivated to learn oral skills. EFL learners' mixed abilities and inadequate educational backgrounds were also responsible for their poor performance (Bruner et al., 2015; Soomro et al., 2019). In an EFL class, there were different levels of learners, e.g., low, mid, and high. Whereas low-level learners tried hard and lost interest in the end, high-level learners developed quickly and received more attention. The last environmental factor was large class sizes (Chen & Goh, 2011). Large class sizes were a common phenomenon in many EFL contexts. In the large classes, it was difficult for the teacher to manage all the learners for engaging in oral tasks. The results showed that there were six types of psychological factors, e.g., anxiety, shyness, self-efficacy, confidence, emotions, and reluctance that were responsible for causing EFL learners' poor communicative competence in EFL contexts. Both anxiety and shyness were equally

addressed in these studies. Some studies suggested that anxiety was a crucial psychological factor that led to learners' disruption, sweating, and trembling while they were speaking. These were due to a lack of practice inside and outside the classroom, insufficient vocabulary, low L2 motivation, and fear of criticism (Aeni et al. 2017; Kasbi & Elahi Shirvan 2017; MacWhinnie & Mitchell 2017). For developing communication skills, learners' shyness that resulting from nervousness, inferiority complexes, and having a fear of doing something wrong, was one of the major psychological factors in EFL contexts (Aeni et al., 2017; Alam & Uddin, 2013). The findings also showed that EFL learners' lack of confidence, resulting from a lack of oral practice and linguistic knowledge, was another challenging factor for oral skills learning (Fitria & Salwa, 2018). According to the results, the emotional factor was another psychological factor that emerged from lack of emotional support from teachers, family members, and friends. The emotional factor influenced female learners more than male learners in Kazakhstan (Ismail et al., 2018). Additionally, self-efficacy was another psychological factor related to learners' aptitudes, attitudes, and aspirations that influenced learners' oral skill development (Idrus et al. 2011). Finally, the results showed that learners' reluctance to speak in English emerged from a lack of confidence for learning oral skills in EFL contexts (Şimon, 2014). All these psychological factors contributed to learners' nervousness when they are communicating using oral skills.

The results also showed some other teaching methods were used to develop learners' communicative competence in different contexts. For example, the communicative teaching method was found effective for enhancing EFL learners' communicative competence. In the Malaysian context, (H. M. P. Alakrash 2022) reported that a communication strategy that promotes spontaneity between speakers to help them agree on meaning in the target language could help them overcome the challenges faced by learners when learning communicative competence skills. By developing communicative strategies, EFL learners gained oral competence (Thu et al., 2016). In the context of Kenya, the interactive teaching method used by EFL lecturers for providing opportunities for language use, accuracy, proficiency, and immediate feedback had a positive impact on learners' communicative competence skills (Jessica et al., 2015). In the context of Chile, microteaching, which engaged learners actively in the learning session, had an influential impact on learners' oral skills development (Herrera & Vielma 2018). Using tablets in ELT teaching in the Portuguese context, iBook and other educational resources assisted learners in improving oral skills (Couvaneiro & Pedro 2015). Integrating Skype with teaching methodologies was found to be very effective and useful for reducing learner anxiety when attempting to develop oral skills (Popescu & Kurt 2017). Moreover, the inclusion of YouTube into the classroom made learners active participants for learning OECSs (Subramaniam et al. 2013).

## Conclusion

The study investigated the strategies used by EFL students in enhancing their communicative competence using digital platforms and identify the factors of developing communicative competence using digital platforms (linguistic factors, environmental factors, psychological factors, and university-related factors). The mixed-method research design was utilized to obtain data from Iraqis undergraduate EFL students. The findings showed that students used digital platforms to develop grammar accuracy, pronunciation, vocabulary, cohesion and coherence, punctuation, and spelling. On the other hand, the challenging factors identified are grouped in four categories which are linguistic factors, environmental factors, psychological factors, and university-related factors. The findings of the study offer new insight for future directions research and recommendation to the university management as these findings could be the cornerstones of the planning for successful implementation of digital platforms in teaching and learning English in general and communicative competence in specific. The study offers comprehensive and integrated implications to the ministry of education in Iraq and the university management to design and implement new policies and agendas to overcome these challenges.

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