

The Impact Of Digital Platforms On Students Communicative Competence Of Iraqi Undergraduate EFL Students

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Abstract

Digital platforms have been proved to play crucial role in enhancing students' language learning. However, no study has investigated this phenomenon in Iraqi context. Thus, this study aimed to investigate the impact of digital platforms on enhancing students' communicative competence. The study was conducted in the Iraq university. Iraqi second-year EFL undergraduate students formed the sample of the study. Fully qualitative research design was employed through using semi-structured interview, the interview protocol was validated by experts before demonstrating. Convenient sampling method was utilized to sample the students. The findings showed that digital platforms enhance students' communicative competence in terms of grammar accuracy, pronunciation, vocabulary, cohesion and coherence, and spelling. This study contributes crucially to the limited EFL technology-based language learning literature.

Keywords: *Communicative competence, digital platforms, language learning, technology-based language learning. EFL learners.*

Introduction

It is indisputable that English is being utilised in practically every area of communication on a global scale as the lingua franca. As English language specialists are well aware, this has led to an explosion in the demand for English language proficiency (Byram & Golubeva, 2020). Therefore, it is now very necessary to acquire English in addition to one's native tongue or first language (Byram & Golubeva, 2020). Consequently, many nations, including Iraq, are teaching English as a foreign language at all levels. This is because the ability to communicate in English has become necessary for both employment and further education. Accordingly, speaking and understanding English orally is regarded as the most critical and significant of the four macro-skills when learning a foreign language (Kachmarchyk, Khrystiuk, & Shanaieva-Tsymbol, 2019). In the post-COVID-19 era, technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) and instruction have been suggested as a way to improve the oral communication skills of Iraqi students in English. However, based on the limited connection between teachers and students and the limited use of digital platforms in learning technologies, it appears that TELL falls short of providing enough opportunities for authentic interaction in the English classroom (Shadiev & Yang, 2020). When it comes to speaking, most Iraqi students frequently struggle to generate the target language accurately (Alakrash, 2022). Numerous technological advancements have taken place since the first industrial revolution and the mechanisation of production, ranging from

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the widespread adoption of electric energy to the widespread adoption of digitalization (H. M. Alakrash, Razak, & Krish, 2022). Cloud computing, the Internet of things, big data, robotics, augmented and virtual reality, and other technologies that appeared like science fiction are now emerging as rather commonplace Industry 4.0 technologies. The global industrial revolution that is occurring is focused on the future, raising labour productivity and boosting organisational competitiveness and efficiency. The advent of business process automation and the replacement of manual labour with intelligent equipment are two major effects of the digital economy on the labour market (Oke & Fernandes, 2020). It is vital to concentrate on the development of the skills and competencies required for the digitalization era during the execution of higher education programmes to supply the digital economy with the high-quality workforce it needs. Of course, one of the most important learning outcomes for the advancement of future Industry 4.0 specialist competencies is communication skills. Our relationships and interactions have changed as a result of technological advancements.

Large class sizes, a lack of teaching resources, and access to technology might be obstacles for EFL teachers when creating effective lesson plans (Soomro et al., 2019). Demotivated students who spend too much time on their phones and are not involved in class activities are another major issue (Ekberg & Gao, 2018). Students who lack motivation and are uncooperative pose a severe threat to the educational process (Yassin et al., 2021). According to Dyer et al. (2015), daily activities frequently centre on lectures and drills in the classroom, which can be a factor in low motivation. Project-based learning, as most of us are aware, helps us solve problems by letting students express themselves and use their imagination in a range of fun learning activities. Students feel more at ease using their learning styles and choices in the real world when they are in a project-based classroom that is centred on their interests. Early in the 19th century, the concept of using technology in language learning programmes gained popularity. Saudi Arabia, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and many other industrialised nations all have high rates of everyday technology use (Rabah, 2015). Given the learners' amazing interest in technology, it could be efficiently used for learning in EFL classes (Farhan & Yusoff, 2019). While having access to the newest technology might be a blessing, it can also cause issues for educators when students act casually in the classroom and spend a lot of time on it (Alqahtani & Rajkhan, 2020). As a result, managing and teaching such students might be challenging. How technology may be used in EFL classes for educational reasons is the question that needs to be answered. By utilising the newest technology (such as cell phones, cameras, computers, the internet, recorders, and language labs) to create a more interactive environment, teachers can improve their students' communicative competence in place of implementing antiquated teaching methods and traditional (teacher-centered) methodologies (Cann, 2016). These devices can be effectively employed in social interactions and conversations for a number of purposes. They learn how to monitor and exchange language knowledge for conversation, engagement, and the acquisition of curriculum subjects; they also acquire interpersonal skills.

Communicative Competence

The foundation of English Language Teaching (ELT) in the United States is the idea that the purpose of language learning is to be able to communicate effectively; the ability to communicate effectively is the main goal, not being able to use the language exactly like a native speaker. Communicative competence was described by (Spitzberg, 1988) as the capacity for effective interpersonal interaction. It speaks of precision, lucidity, cohesiveness, competence, efficacy, and suitability". Vangelisti, Daly, & Friedrich, (2013) operationalized the concept by stating that communicative competence is "a situational ability to set realistic and appropriate goals and to maximise their achievement by using

knowledge of self, other, context, and communication theory to generate adaptive communication performances. In the teaching of English, communicative ability plays a crucial role. Learning when, where, and with whom to use a language in a contextually appropriate manner is just as important to developing communicative competence in a second language as mastering its grammatical principles. Understanding English syntax and vocabulary is not enough for this; you also need to know how to use it in conversational contexts. A person who is proficient in communication will be able to buy, sell, persuade, and convey emotions in English; additionally, he will be proficient in both formal and informal language usage. According to Brown (1994), communicative language teaching (CLT) allows students to practise their English in a speech community and gives them the language skills they will need after they graduate from college and enter the workforce. When seeking solutions for large class numbers and uninterested learners, educators should take into account projects that adhere to the CLT guidelines. Project work, which allows students to collaborate on tasks that require authentic, relevant, and real-life communicative interactions, should be the main focus instead of teaching a structural syllabus that primarily consists of grammar and vocabulary drills. This will help learners acquire communicative competence in a second language, much like a person learns their first language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001) even though it is difficult to put the CLT principles into practice.

Methodology

The fully quantitative research design was adopted in this study to obtain data from Iraqi 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. The sample was sampled using convenient sampling technique. This method of sampling is to collect data from participants who are readily and easily accessible to the researcher. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 EFL students to explore the impact of digital platforms in enhancing communicative competence of the EFL students. The sample frame for the interview was (12) interviewees is an acceptable number for interviews participants (Guest et al. 2006) stating that “at least six participants for phenomenological studies”. Conceptually, saturation may be the desired endpoint of data collection (p.61). The data of the interviews were transcribed analyzed thematically using QSR NVivo software. The interview protocol was validated by experts in the field of digital platforms before piloting to students. The findings are presented in form of themes and subthemes. Due to the confidentiality issues, anonymity was maintained to protect the actual participants. The gender of the participants is mentioned to demonstrate the tendency and variation of the participants’ answers based on their experience. Therefore, each participant was anonymously re-identified based on numbers from 1 to 12. The new identification is consistent with the ethical requirement to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Findings and Discussion

This study tackles the ways students use digital platforms in enhancing their communicative skills from linguistic perspectives. 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 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.

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.”

“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”.

“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”

“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”

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.”

When writing their papers, students primarily use verb tenses to pinpoint events along a timeline. However, if the proper tense is not used, their written works could have a distorted meaning. The fact that these errors pertain to the contextual meaning of the word makes them potentially classified as semantic errors. Students can practise writing with auto-feedback on websites and digital platforms, which can help them write with better grammar. The students reported numerous helpful strategies for utilising digital platforms to improve their understanding of tenses. One such strategy involves giving students direct exposure to the use of correct tenses by having them write grammatically correct sentences that will be evaluated by the platform's software, such as Grammarly. The spoken language is more adaptable than the written language in the textbook since it allows for some repetition of ideas using various word choices and grammatical constructions.

“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.”

The researcher can draw the conclusion that some components can improve students' listening skills based on the results of the aforementioned interview. Digital platforms let

students learn more about intonation and rhythm, the distinctions between formal and informal language, reduced speech, language's communication roles, and how to interpret meaning based on various grammatical forms.

Pronunciation

According to the majority of students, there is very little opportunity to practise speaking and listening to English in the Iraqi EFL context and for this reason, pronouncing words correctly is a big deal for the students. Since there is no set accent for the Iraqi setting, students may pronounce words incorrectly. Additionally, the students are ignorant of the distinctions between American and British accents. However, learning pronunciation through digital channels...

“...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.”

Listening to podcasts and audiobooks that cover topics of interest and expose them to various communication styles and perspectives is another technique to improve pronunciation. The research has confirmed that students' listening comprehension, vocabulary, pronunciation, and critical thinking abilities can all be enhanced by podcasts and audiobooks. This result was observed in numerous student responses.

“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](http://www.citcat.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.

“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. 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.

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”.

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.”

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”.

Concluding Remarks

Conclusively, the students are of the opinion that one of the finest ways to advance their discourse and communicative language skills is through the use of digital platforms. The results of the interviews demonstrated that users' communication abilities on digital platforms are enhanced in terms of vocabulary, coherence, cohesiveness, and pronunciation as well as grammar. Furthermore, internet platforms enhanced writers' tenses, spelling, teamwork, and punctuation. Digital platforms also help users with their intonation and rhythm, comprehension of reduced speech, communication functions, and ability to discern meaning from various grammatical forms when it comes to listening abilities. The students concluded by mentioning how using digital platforms helps them learn new language, read more quickly and understand what they read, and comprehend a variety of text formats. The following suggestions are intended to improve students' communicative proficiency in the English language: universities should be designed with an improved English language communication curriculum that can progressively support the development of students' discourse proficiency. This programme could take the shape of instructional modules created to address the observed gaps in language and discourse competency as well as the grey areas of oral and written discourse components. The administration of the university may take into account using animated and computer-assisted audio and video presentations to improve the student's language and discourse proficiency. The administrations of the universities ought to implement an educational approach that gives students greater exposure to the English language. Students are provided with numerous and varied opportunities to enhance their communicative competence in this way. It is recommended that university administrations implement a policy prohibiting code-switching in English language instruction. Additionally, students are required to communicate in English when engaging in class recitations and conversing with friends and classmates on school property. The university administrations must take into consideration the adoption of the proposed English Language Programme to ensure that teachers and students can practise and engage in discourse in the language. Additionally, a study is intended to be conducted on the challenges that students face when translating the Vietnamese cultural language into English, including lexical code-switching, contextual and conceptual swapping, and translating.

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