

Factors Affecting Iraqi Academic Leaders' Communicative Competence in English: A Sequential Mixed Methods Study

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Abstract

English language communicative competence represents an academic leader's ability to use language effectively. However, to date, Iraqi academic leaders' communicative competence has not been as effective as predictable and leads to lower intake of international students in Iraqi universities. This paper presents the findings of a study which explored the factors affecting Iraqi academic leaders' communicative competence in English. The study adopted an exploratory sequential design, where nine semi-structured interviews were conducted online with academic leaders, followed by questionnaire distribution to 108 additional academic leaders. The participants for both parts of the study were from various universities in Iraq. The data collection and data analysis for the research were guided by four theories, namely the communicative competence theory, communication theory, theory of planned behaviour and leadership competence model. Data collected from the interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically. Data from the questionnaires were analysed descriptively and inferentially using SPSS (v.20). The most significant findings were that cultural factors, a positive attitude towards communicative ability, efficiency in communication, collaboration, problem-solving, and critical skills were the factors that affected the Iraqi leaders' communicative competence. Finally, a model for developing communicative competence among Iraqi academic leaders was formulated based on the findings. The model consists of training programmes for communicative competence development using digital tools for language use, an electronic examination process with efficient monitoring, and language initiatives for enhancing Iraqi academic leaders' communication competence.

Keywords: communicative competence, academic leaders, leadership, communication, cultural competence, development

1. Introduction

Most colleges in the modern world require academic leaders prepared to collaborate with their colleagues and subordinates to effect change, be inspirational in creating academic vision and be proactive in putting the changes into action in a way that is compatible with the university's goals and vision. Academic leaders need to be competent in communication as it is crucial for them to be able to inspire and empower people around them. Effective communication is a soft skill indispensable to every leader. According to Canale and Swain (1980), communicative competence is characterised as compositional ability in four areas: 1) words and rules, 2) appropriate use of communication strategies, 3) cohesion, and 4) coherence. Using effective communication enables a leader and an employee to track their progress towards achieving organisational objectives and goals (Abdul Halim & Razak, 2014).

1.1 Problem Statement

Lynn-Sze (2021) argued that university leaders' communicative skills are vital for the realisation of their university's vision, goals, and attitudes. In a study, Holmes (2023) found a significant relationship between leadership communication style, personality traits, and organisational productivity. A key factor that has been found to influence leaders' communication skills is communicative competence, and it is also one of the primary predictors of emergent leadership. Influential leaders are skilled in communication, adept at effectively conveying information upward to their superiors as well as disseminating information downward to their subordinates. This effective information exchange is paramount to a leader's success (Sampe, 2023). Mohammed et al. (2020) in their study identified four central communicative behaviours of leaders, namely structuring, facilitating, relating, and representing. They also distinguished eight principles of communicative leadership. However, academic leaders' inability and lack of competence in communication have been shown to negatively impact the performance of their universities (Mohammed et al., 2020). This issue is particularly challenging among Iraqi university leaders who themselves are struggling in their academic practice.

1.2 The Importance of the Problem

The importance of effective communication skills for academic leaders cannot be overstated as they play a crucial role in collaboration, stimulating change, and achieving organisational goals. In the Iraqi context, the lack of research on academic leaders' communication skills makes it difficult to understand the challenges and obstacles they face in communicating (Lazim, 2022). By exploring the factors

that influence communicative competence, this study can contribute towards improving the communication skills of academic leaders in Iraqi universities through the targeted training programme and intervention model developed.

Despite the significance of effective communication in ensuring effective leadership, empirical research on the determinants influencing communicative competence among academic leaders in Iraqi universities is lacking. Thus, an inquiry into the variables affecting communication skills among academic leaders in the context of Iraqi universities is necessary to fill the research gap.

1.3 Research Question

RQ: What are the factors that affect communicative competence in English among academic leaders in Iraqi universities?

1.4 Research Hypotheses

HO1: There is no correlation between factors that affect communicative competence and cultural factors.

HO2: There is no correlation between cultural factors and practices and patterns of using ICT.

1.5 Literature Review

In the context of Iraq, communicative competence of academic leaders is an issue seen to affect not only academics in universities but also academic achievement (Ahmed Waham et al., 2020; Al-Husseini & Elbeltagi, 2016; Mohammed et al., 2020). Although several studies have emphasised the significance of communicative ability in various contexts including collaborative academic endeavours, very little research has been conducted on communicative competence in English, and there is especially a dearth of research onto communicative competence of academic leaders in Iraq. Additionally, there is a need for research on the function of training in enhancing the communicative ability of academic leaders because of the importance of this set of skills in attaining the goals and vision of the university as well as the implications for educational leadership and leadership programmes that are to be conducted. This study aimed to fill the void by exploring Iraqi academic leaders' communicative competence in English. It also sought to highlight the significance of communication skills in situations like the COVID-19 pandemic for academic leaders.

According to Mukhtar et al. (2020), the construct of "communicative leadership" is applied to associations that analyse and develop communicative competence among leaders since it is at the core of effective leadership. In universities, the focus of communicative competence for academic leaders is on the acquisition of the necessary skills for these leaders to communicate and emphasise their functions, effectively play their roles, and implement communicative skills development in actual practice in the learning process. Among university leaders, communicative competence progress during technology emphasises on the skillsets and practices in technology that these leaders need to have, including the existing practices, scheduling, syllabus, resources, crew development and matters, communication, sustenance, and technological implementation. Academic leaders are required to know the abilities of the new technologies and to acquire and develop personal proficiency in their use as this would inspire examination of new methods in teaching, learning, and administration (Abdullah et al., 2019; Hamat et al., 2019; Sulaiman, 2019; Banwart, 2020; Cunningham et al., 2020; Alfaifi et al., 2022). Abdul Razak et al. (2020) and Azmuddin, et al. (2020) identified ICT as a set of skills perceived as relevant to academics in this present age. The authors also reported that these abilities significantly impact academics' leadership qualities, enabling them to meet universities' need for academic leaders capable of facilitating invention and supplying support to the learning society.

Academic leaders in most Iraqi universities need to develop communicative competence to lead their colleagues and to introduce positive changes in pedagogy. Unfortunately, a review of pertinent literature revealed that none of the existing empirical studies have examined the factors that affect communicative competence among academic leaders in Iraqi universities despite communicative competence playing a significant role in ensuring effective leadership. Based on the gap identified, the following research question was therefore developed for the study to examine the factors that affect communicative competence among academic leaders in Iraqi universities.

1.6 Theoretical Framework

A theoretical model was developed from four theories and a model, namely the communicative competence theory (Hymes 1972; Canale & Swain 1980), communication theory (Pearson & Nelson 2000), theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen 1985), and leadership competency model (McClelland 1970, 1980; Clerk 2016). The theory of planned behaviour conjectured that management's attitudes and individual norms (the impact of peers and co-workers) may affect how a person utilises ICT and social networking for language acquisition and the development of communicative competence (Ajzen, 1985). Canale and Swain (1980) and Dell Hymes (1972) explained that the idea of communicative competence grew out of the opposition to Noam Chomsky's concept of linguistic competence. It is dominated by proficiency in four areas as elaborated by Canale and Swain (1980), namely (1) words and rules, (2) appropriateness, (3) use of transmission tactics, and (4) consistency and unity. Additionally, interaction skills are said to include linguistic proficiency.

A communicator is able to achieve their goal through effective and appropriate contact, which is referred to as communicative competency. For a leader, communicative competency is the capacity to utilise language effectively for communication with the members in the organisation as well as others outside their organisation. The four main frameworks for communicating effectively are (1) personal skills, (2) required skills, (3) knowledge, and (4) talents (David McClelland 1970, 1980; Clerk 2016). Additionally, an effective communicator should respect the six communication competency principles, namely source, message, channel, reception, feedback, and context (Person & Nelson, 2000).

In this study, Ajzen's (1985) Behavioural/Technology Competence Application which is built on four components, namely (1) Attitude, (2)

Behavioural Intention, (3) Individual Customs, and (4) Perceived Behavioural Control was applied to the Communicative Competence Model. The application is considered fitting as the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) is founded on the idea that behavioural success depends on skill/ability (i.e., behavioural control) and motivation (i.e., intention). Moreover, TPB has been effectively applied in studies that looked at prediction and change of behaviour, including behaviour related to the use and adoption of technology. Ajzen (1985) has shown through TPB that behavioural intention is determined by three primary constructs, namely behaviour-related attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. The three theories and the model were used to develop the framework for this study to provide a solid foundation in discussing the relationships between the constructs in the study and to guide the procedures for collecting, analysing, and interpreting the data.

2. Method

The objective of the study was to explore factors that affect communicative competence among Iraqi academic leaders. In replying to the research question formulated, this research adopted an exploratory sequential mixed-methods research design. The approach involved collecting and analysing qualitative data in the initial stage, followed by the collection and analysis of quantitative data in the subsequent stage. Figure 1 illustrates the research design adopted in this study.

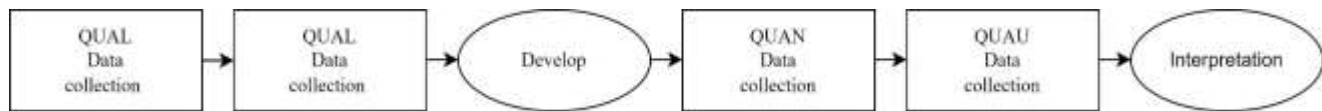


Figure 1. The exploratory research design

As shown in Figure 1, the use of qualitative methods in the first stage of the research was to enhance the effectiveness of the quantitative research that followed. This design was exploratory in nature and sought to establish the foundation for future studies, and to determine whether existing theories can explain the observed phenomenon.

2.1 Sampling Procedures

For the qualitative component of the study where interviews were conducted to collect data, two sampling techniques, namely purposive and snowball sampling were utilised to recruit the study samples. Meanwhile, for the quantitative part of the study which involved the use of a survey questionnaire, purposive sampling was used. These sampling methods were considered appropriate for the goal of the study which sought to discover the elements affecting communicative ability development of academic leaders in Iraqi universities. Purposeful sampling is a type of non-probability sampling which is sometimes referred to as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling as the sampling method involves researchers using their best judgement to pick members of the population considered suited to the purpose of their study for participation in their research (Creswell 2012). In contrast, snowball sampling, which is also a non-probability sampling technique, describes deliberate sampling that occurs after a study has started, in which individuals who are recruited to take part in a study are asked to suggest another participant to form part of the sample for the study. Creswell and Poht (2016) remarked that researchers often rely on their judgement when selecting people from the population to participate in their study. The use of both sampling techniques is therefore considered suited to the purpose of the study.

It is typical for researchers to collect data for qualitative studies like this one until the conclusions can no longer be significantly changed by new information (data saturation). The inclusion of nine academic leaders from various universities in Iraq for the qualitative component of the study was deemed adequate as it was sufficient for the study to reach saturation across the data. Meanwhile, for the quantitative study, a total of 108 academic leaders were surveyed. The respondents were of different backgrounds in terms of the variables of gender, age, academic qualification, academic position, leadership position, and years of experience in a leadership position. The distribution of the respondents in relation to these variables was analysed based on descriptive statistics including frequency and percentage.

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were conducted with nine academic leaders who were purposefully selected for the qualitative study, comprising deans, heads of departments, and programme coordinators. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using techniques of typological and thematic analysis, following Hatch (2002). The data were tagged and classified once the typologies were determined in order to investigate the relationships between the patterns and locate the pertinent themes. Meanwhile, a questionnaire was used to collect data from the respondents for the quantitative research component of the study. A total of 108 respondents from various universities in Iraq comprising academic leaders of various positions (deans, heads of departments, professors, assistant professors, coordinators) were surveyed. Data collected from the survey questionnaire were examined using SPSS to descriptively analyse the key constructs, which were then explicitly presented based on descriptive statistics.

2.3 Instrumentation

This study employed both interviews and questionnaires as instruments to collect data. The semi-structured interviews were used to gather qualitative data from nine academic leaders. Meanwhile, the 51 item-questionnaire, rated based on the Likert scale, was used to survey 108 academic leaders of various positions attached to Iraqi universities. The Likert scale was rated based on five options ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). To ensure validity and reliability, the questionnaire was piloted with 30 respondents. Based on the results

of the pilot test, some of the items in the initial questionnaire were rephrased before the finalised version was used in the actual study.

2.4 Validity and Reliability

Validity refers to the integrity and application of the methods undertaken and the degree of precision to which the findings accurately reflect the data, while reliability describes consistency within the employed analytical procedures (Noble & Smith, 2015). The study's trustworthiness was ensured by allowing all the participants of the interviews to express themselves freely without any potential bias or personal motivation from the researcher. Meanwhile, the internal reliability of the questionnaire was measured using Cronbach's alpha, which is a scale of reliability or an internal consistency indicator (Taber, 2017). The alpha value shows the degree to which the items that make up the scale measure the same underlying attribute. Based on the Cronbach's alpha value calculated for each item, an average Cronbach's alpha value of 0.85 was obtained for the questionnaire, signifying that it had acceptable internal consistency. This is because a frequently cited acceptable range of Cronbach's alpha for research purposes is a value of 0.70 or higher (Nunnally, 1978).

2.5 Participants

This study involved nine respondents who participated in the semi-structured interviews, and 108 respondents who responded to the questionnaires which were distributed to academic leaders in various universities in Iraq.

Table 1. Demographics of interview respondents

Code	Academic Qualification	Gender	Academic Position	Department	Administrative Designation
R1	PhD	Male	Asst. Prof	English	Coordinator
R2	PhD	Female	Asst. Prof.	English	Coordinator
R3	PhD	Male	Prof.	English	Assistant Dean
R4	PhD	Male	Prof	English	Head of Department
R5	PhD	Female	Asst. Prof.	English	Head of Department
R6	PhD	Male	Prof	English	Dean
R7	PhD	Female	Prof.	English	Head of Department
R8	PhD	Male	Asst. Prof.	English	Head of Department
R9	PhD	Male	Asst. Prof.	English	Head of Department

Table 1 presents the demographics of the nine respondents who participated in the semi-structured interviews. Six of the respondents were male academic leaders and the other three females. The respondents were all PhD holders, where their academic position ranged from Professors to Assistant Professors in the English department. They also held administrative post that ranged from a dean to heads of departments, and coordinators.

Table 2. Academic leaders' demographic characteristics

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Female	49	45.4%
	Male	59	54.6%
Age Group	41-50	49	45.3%
	>50	31	30.1%
	31 to 40	24	23.3%
	<30	4	3.9%
Academic Qualification	Doctorate Degree	73	67.6%
	Master's Degree	35	32.4%
Academic Position	Assistant Professor	47	43.8%
	Professor	29	26.9%
	Assistant Lecturer	16	14.8%
	Lecturer	13	12%
Leadership Position	Coordinator	54	50%
	Head of the Department	41	38%
	Head of Electronic Learning in the Department	9	8.3%
	Deputy Dean	3	2.8%
Years of Leadership Position	Dean	1	0.9%
	At least 3 years but less than 5 years	39	36.1
	At least 5 years but less than 10 years	41	39.9
	10 years or more	28	25.9

Table 2 presents the distribution of the demographic characteristics of the 108 academic leaders who participated in the quantitative survey. The respondents were of different backgrounds in terms of gender, age, academic qualification, academic position, leadership position, and years of experience in a leadership position. More than half of the respondents, at 54.6% or 59 respondents, were male, while the rest, at 45.4% or 49 respondents, were female. Most of the respondents were in the age range of between 41 to 50 years with the frequency count of 49 respondents or 45.3%. This was followed by respondents who were >50 years at 30.1% (31 respondents), and those aged between 31 and 40 years at 23.3% (24 respondents). Only four respondents were of the age below 30 with a frequency distribution of 3.9%. As for qualifications, the majority of the respondents, at 67.6% (73 respondents), held doctorate degrees, while 35 respondents (32.4%) had a master's degree. Based on the results, in terms of academic position, the frequency showed that 43.5% of the respondents were assistant

professors, 29.7 % were professors, 14.8 % were assistant lecturers, and 12 % were lecturers. The results for leadership position showed that most of the respondents held the coordinator post (50%), while only 0.9% held the post of deans. Lastly, regarding years of leadership experience, 39.9% or 41 respondents reported holding their position for at least five years or more, and only 25.9% of the respondents reported having been in their leadership position for 10 years or more.

3. Results

Findings from the thematic analysis of the interview data revealed eight factors that affected communicative competence among the academic leaders, namely knowledge sharing, research innovation, interaction with international students, interaction with international colleagues, collaboration, increased publications, management of academic staff, and salary increment.

3.1 Knowledge Sharing

Several codes were categorised under the theme of *knowledge sharing*. The codes included interaction, honesty, a new method of teaching, covering the syllabus, appreciation, enjoyable classroom experience, and appropriateness. Sharing of knowledge enabled the academic leaders to develop their academic skills, transfer knowledge, and use the English language effectively. Thus, through interaction and learning, the academic leaders were able to develop their communicative competence. Communicative competence also enabled the academic leaders to use new teaching methods consistent with the course syllabus. This encouraged information and knowledge sharing during learning, discussion, and delivery of lectures to their students in an enjoyable environment in the classroom, while knowledge sharing with their colleagues took place during seminars and in their day-to-day interactions. Having communicative competence also helped them to use appropriate language when addressing each other as colleagues and when communicating with students. The academic leaders mentioned that their students appreciated it when academic leaders have a good command of the English language, good communication skills, and used suitable teaching methods. As R1 stated: *"In my opinion, communicative competence helps me a lot when interacting with my colleagues and students using English at the department."* (R1, transcript A, 29/1/2021, line 11). R 1 further explained that his ability to use the English language helped him to teach efficiently as it *"... also helps me find out new ways and methods for teaching English as a foreign language."* (R1, transcript A, 29/1/2021, line 31).

3.2 Research Innovation

Innovation in research was found to be an influential factor that contributed to the academic leaders' communicative competence. It included sharing research through workshops, being knowledgeable and motivated, carrying out research, finding resources easily and quickly, finding references and evidence, and improving teaching. Good communicative competence helped the academic leaders to be knowledgeable and motivated them to conduct research. Communicative competence enabled the academic leaders to participate in international conferences, get ideas about new research areas, and successfully search for relevant references and publications such as articles and books. Moreover, the academic leaders mentioned using the findings of research to improve their teaching. The academic leaders reported that they shared and collaborated with their colleagues in writing up research through workshops, academic writing courses, and English courses as well as during teaching and in their daily conversation. As most of their research is conducted in English, the academic leaders stated that they needed to have high proficiency in English communication in order to read, understand, and interpret research materials. As R6 stated:

"I easily got invitations to participate in different conferences abroad due to my bridges of communication with different colleagues who share the same specialization all over the world. Accordingly, I participated in scientific conferences held in America, Britain, South Korea and UAE." (R6, 23 June 2021, line 15, page 14)

3.3 Interaction with International Students

Interaction with international students enhanced the academic leaders' communicative competence. This theme included the codes of improving communication skills, oral communication, empathy and understanding, e-interaction, and finding a topic. Some of the academic leaders shared that they communicated with their international students through email and messenger applications and such practices helped them improve their communicative competence. However, some complained about the lack of international students in their department. Additionally, R3 remarked that academic leaders who are highly competent in communication are able to empathise with students as they are able to understand and address the feelings and problems experienced by students effectively, as well as take the perspectives of others. As R3 explained, *"Think the communicator's empathy here may play an important role showing the ability to be other-oriented and trying to understand the students' feelings and problems. Furthermore, this kind of communicator treats people fairly"* (R3, 27 January 2021, line 15).

3.4 Interaction with International Colleagues

Another factor which was found to affect the academic leaders' communicative competence was *interaction with international colleagues*. Analysis showed that the academic leaders recognised that they needed English language competence to interact effectively with international colleagues. Moreover, the opportunity to interact with international colleagues is valuable as it would help them develop communicative competence in the English language by improving their capacity to engage in social interactions, enhancing their oral communication skills, and promoting collaborative work. Additionally, communicating via the internet in English with international colleagues also helped them develop their communicative competence. Some of the academic leaders mentioned that they interacted with their international counterparts both face-to-face and online (e.g., via email and messenger applications) when they collaborated to conduct

research work and participated in conferences or academic events. R1 explained that *“Language proficiency is helpful in communicating with colleagues in other countries, and also it improves when you have an opportunity to communicate with overseas colleagues”* (R1, transcript A, 29 January 2021, line 19).

3.5 Collaborative Work

The findings indicated that having competence in English language communication enabled the academic leaders to collaboratively work with others. These skills helped them in doing research, gaining knowledge and skills about ethics and morals, and communicating with colleagues both nationally and internationally. The respondents felt that academic leaders should be ethical in their collaborative and cooperative work and avoid unethical behaviour. Many highlighted the importance of effective communication for participation in collaborative work. To illustrate, R7 stated that *“I can say that my communicative ability has helped me to have highly effective communication and cooperation with all my colleagues”* (R7, transcript G, 25 May 2021, line22).

3.6 Enhancing Publication

The findings indicated that having a greater number of publications contributed to better communicative competence in the English language among academic leaders. The academic leaders recognised that publications could help them develop their research and communication skills. This was raised by R1 who mentioned, *“Of course, researchers need to publish outside their countries; therefore, they benefit from their communicative competence when they deal with foreign magazines”* (R1, transcript A, 29 January 2021, line 14). However, many shared that they were hesitant to participate in conferences or publish articles because of the costs involved. A concern was that such a situation may negatively impact their communicative competence in the English language.

3.7 Managing Academic Staff

Three codes, namely managing staff, teaching, and being helpful to colleagues were categorised under the theme of managing academic staff. The academic leaders’ fluency in English resulted in the staff showing respect and accepting the management style they practised. A competent communicator is seen as someone who is able to decide what is appropriate in a specific situation and has the ability to adapt their communication style and use the appropriate language styles depending on the situation faced. The academic leaders mentioned that they use the English language in certain activities such as during lectures or workshops where they have to plan and work together with others. English is employed for different activities in their respective departments on occasions such as seeking help, giving orders, giving suggestions, explaining scientific and linguistic concepts, commenting on plans, and reviewing materials. The findings indicated that having greater communicative competence in the English language enabled the academic leaders to convey authority rather than aggression. The respondents elaborated on some of the important qualities of being a good academic leader in managing academic staff which included listening to the ideas and suggestions of colleagues and being open to sharing personal or official problems. Such practice would establish a close relationship among the staff and help ease their tasks. This is elaborated by R5 who stated, *“First of all, the essential basic quality is to be a good listener to others, to hear their ideas, suggestions, problems – business or private – this would create an intimacy which helps a lot to make work go on easily”* (R5, transcript F 19 May 2021, line 8).

3.8 Salary Increment

Salary increments may influence communicative competence as it is viewed as a motivation that would drive academic leaders towards continuous learning and training. This kind of motivation encourages them to view good communication skills as instrumental for career advancement. Accordingly, the ability to communicate well and proficiently has helped some of the academic leaders to secure well-paid jobs or gain job promotion. The academic leaders remarked that a low salary may result in them losing interest in attending English courses for self-improvement, and as a result, this would weaken their communicative competence. One of the academic leaders even suggested that the more competent leaders should be paid a higher salary as the lack of competence in communicating in English may affect performance. However, a few challenged this idea and believed that there should be no connection between communicative competence and their pay. This was stated by R4 who felt that *“There is no relationship between communicative competence and the salary”* (R4, transcript D, 23 January 2021, line 30).

Analysis of data from the questionnaire survey revealed that the factors affecting communicative competence among academic leaders were mainly cultural factors. The analysis revealed the importance of cultural factors in communicating effectively in English as it would facilitate the academic leaders in presenting information, giving ideas, and in assisting academic leaders in adapting to new environments. Many felt that inability to communicate effectively in English would affect academic leaders’ competence.

Table 3. Relationship between factors that affect communicative competence and cultural factors

Correlation	Factors that affectcommunicative competence	Cultural factors
Pearson Correlation	1	.785**
Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
N	108	108

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 4. Relationship between cultural factors and practice and pattern of usage of ICT

Correlation	Cultural factors	Practice and pattern of usage of ICT
Pearson Correlation	1	.722**
Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
N	108	108

Note: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The level of support and positive relevance of culture were the factors found to correlate with communicative competence. Examination of the Pearson correlation coefficient revealed a relationship between factors that affect communicative competence and cultural factors, with an R-value of 0.785. Therefore, these variables showed high correlation based on the correlation coefficient table interpretation (see Table 3). The other affective factors were practice and patterns of using ICT. The Pearson correlation analysis showed that the relationship between cultural factors and practice and ICT usage patterns obtained an R-value of 0.722. Similarly, a high correlation between the variables was found based on the correlation coefficient value obtained (see Table 4). Integration of the data through the process of triangulation revealed that the quantitative analysis supported the qualitative analysis.

4. Discussion

Analysis of the qualitative interview data identified eight factors that were found to affect the academic leaders' communicative competence. These factors included knowledge sharing, research innovation, interaction with international colleagues, collaboration, increased publication, salary increments, and management of academic staff. Knowledge sharing, which can occur during learning, discussion, and interaction with colleagues and students, enabled the academic leaders to develop their academic skills, practise knowledge transfer, and use the English language effectively. This indicates that communicative competence can be transferred and developed through interaction and learning. In addition, communicative competence in English enabled the academic leaders to innovate in writing research. As indicated by one of the respondents, communicative competence also allowed them to innovate in their lessons with colleagues through workshops, sharing of academic research writing, and by taking English courses. Moreover, as most of their research activities were conducted in English, the academic leaders needed to have communicative proficiency in the language to read, understand, and interpret research materials as well as conduct effective discussions.

The findings also showed that competence in the English language was also required of the academic leaders so as to enable them to interact effectively with international colleagues and students. In addition, writing for publications, including journals and books, require strong communicative competence from academic leaders. This includes understanding readers' language capabilities and tailoring their writing styles to match the ability level of the intended audience so that the readers would be able to comprehend the text easily. Additionally, academic leaders from different ethnic groups outside Iraq and within Iraq felt that communicative competence in the English language is important to engage in collaborative work, as communication involves using both oral and body language. Thus, strong communicative competence would help them avoid using language that would offend their colleagues. It was also found that salary increments motivated the academic leaders to improve their language proficiency and communicative competence in the English language through continuous learning and training. They also considered communicative competence vital in managing academic staff under their charge, and that workshops, seminars, and lectures targeted at improving communicative competence are effective ways to improve their English language mastery.

Triangulation of the data revealed that the quantitative analysis supported the qualitative analysis. Data from the survey showed that the most influential factors affecting the communicative competence of academic leaders in Iraqi universities were cultural factors. The level of support and positive relevance of culture were found to be the most influential factors and had high correlation. Data analysis revealed the importance of cultural factors in effective communication in English as it facilitated the academic leaders in presenting information and giving ideas and assisted them in adapting to new environments. The findings therefore suggest that the lack of communicative competence in English will affect the competency of Iraqi academic leaders in executing their duties and performing their roles.

The findings of this study concur with those of past studies in showing that communicative competence reflects on a leader's ability to effectively use the English language (Banwart, 2020) to communicate appropriately and effectively in various social situations (Cunningham et al., 2020). Likewise, the degree to which leadership goals are achieved depends on the leader's level of communicative competence (Mukhtar, Risnita & Prasetyo, 2020). McKay and Hornberger (1996) and Akkuş et al. (2023) found several factors relevant to communicative competence, including listening skills, non-verbal communication skills, proficiency in writing and use of ICT. It has also been found that individuals who can develop multiple strategies for enacting these general skills typically have higher communication competence, which promotes effective leadership styles and reduces conflict with others, resulting in greater efficiency in accomplishing work tasks with positive outcomes (Mayfield, Mayfield & Sharbrough, 2015). Leaders with communicative competence have also been shown to demonstrate greater accountability, which in turn increases performance and productivity (Sayed & Edgar, 2019; Azmuddin, 2020).

Communicative competence promotes interpersonal relationships, and the model developed by Canale and Swain (1980) highlighted three factors that are considered to be important in communicative competence. These factors are grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. Additionally, Swain (1984) later added discourse competence as another influential factor. In the present study, the influence of communicative competence on interpersonal relationships among academic leaders was found through

effective listening and non-verbal communication, which consequently promoted good relationships between the leaders and their peers, colleagues and staff. Therefore, the findings in this study are in agreement with those of past studies where communicative competence, which comprises grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence and discourse competence, has been found to be effective in promoting cordial working relationships (Mukhtar et al., 2020), effective learning and performance (Jambo & Hongde, 2020), as well as fostering a university culture that encourages exploration of new techniques in communication for management, teaching and learning (Banwart, 2020; Nambiar et al., 2020; Wasserman & Zwebner, 2017.). Furthermore, the present study also found the significance of communicative competence on motivation towards achieving positive outcomes. This finding is supported by Al-Husseini and Elbeltagi (2016) who indicated that a leader with effective communication engages employees in dialogue and actively shares and seeks feedback, and such an approach encourages participative decision-making, which consequently allows for transparency and innovation.

5. Conclusion

It can be concluded that the qualitative and quantitative results combined indicate the importance of communicative competence of leaders in the academic environment, primarily because it facilitates the communication of information and ideas to all, regardless of background and cultural affiliation. It also assists academic leaders in adapting to a new environment. Consequently, having effective communication skills assists academic leaders in managing academic staff under their charge and improves collaboration, especially since technology can now facilitate interaction and knowledge sharing among academic leaders both locally and internationally.

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