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Research Paper

Comparative Analysis of Interactional Competence in Iraqi Elementary and Advanced EFL Learners Across Face-to-Face and Virtual Learning Environments

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Abstract
Abstract This research covers the differences in some of the interactional competence components, such as topic management, turn management, non-verbal behavior, breakdown repair, and interactive listening, among Iraqi elementary and advanced EFL learners. In relation to both the face-to-face and virtual environments, this article tries to divulge how the said competencies of these learners change with task types—opinion exchange and jigsaw tasks—and educational settings. A mixed-methods design was used to collect quantitative and qualitative data through recordings in both learning environments. The statistical comparison showed that there were significant differences between the interactional competence components for elementary and advanced learners across the two environments. Particularly, advanced learners took turns more efficiently and listened interactively more successfully in face-to-face than in virtual settings; elementary learners struggled to manage topics in virtual compared to face-to-face settings. These findings have implications for EFL pedagogy, particularly in the area of improving virtual learning environments for interactional competence development. The discussion addresses some implications related to instructional design, pedagogical practices, and language assessment in EFL contexts.
Keywords: Environment, Face-to-Face Learning, Interactional Competence, Iraqi Students, Language Assessment, Topic Management, Turn Management, Virtual Learning

تحلیل مقایسه‌ای مهارت تعاملی بین زبان‌آموزان عراقی زبان انگلیسی در سطوح مقدماتی و پیشرفته در محیط‌های یادگیری حضوری و مجازی
این مطالعه به بررسی تفاوت‌های موجود در مؤلفه‌های مهارت تعاملی بین زبان‌آموزان عراقی زبان انگلیسی در دو سطح مقدماتی و پیشرفته، در محیط‌های حضوری و مجازی می‌پردازد. با استفاده از یک طراحی روش‌های ترکیبی، این تحقیق مؤلفه‌های مهارت تعاملی شامل مدیریت موضوع، مدیریت نوبت، رفتارهای غیرکلامی، رفع وقفه‌های مکالمه و گوش دادن تعاملی را طی انجام دو نوع تکلیف، یعنی تبادل نظر و جستجو در پازل، مورد ارزیابی قرار می‌دهد. نتایج نشان می‌دهند که زبان‌آموزان پیشرفته نسبت به زبان‌آموزان مقدماتی عملکرد بهتری در مدیریت نوبت و گوش دادن تعاملی در محیط حضوری دارند، در حالی که زبان‌آموزان مقدماتی با چالش‌های بیشتری در مدیریت موضوع در محیط مجازی روبرو هستند. این یافته‌ها نشان می‌دهند که طراحی راهکارهای آموزشی خاص برای تقویت مهارت‌های تعاملی در محیط‌های مجازی می‌تواند مؤثر باشد و این پژوهش با ارائه بینش‌هایی برای آموزش زبان به بهبود یادگیری زبان‌آموزان کمک می‌کند.
کلیدواژه‌ها :مهارت تعاملی، دانشجویان عراقی، محیط یادگیری مجازی، یادگیری حضوری، ارزیابی زبان، مدیریت موضوع، مدیریت نوبت

Introduction

The concept of interactional competence (IC) has drawn much attention within the SLA field in recent years as scholars have come to realize its importance, in addition to grammatical accuracy

or knowledge of vocabulary. IC underlines the ability of a learner to take part in dynamic, co-constructed spoken interactions that lie at the very center of effective communication (Pekarek et al., 2018; Byun et al., 2018). Unlike more traditional views of language competence, which often focus on individual linguistic proficiency, IC is inherently social and thus entails creating the ability in learners to adapt to interlocutors, manage turns in conversation, sustain topics, and display both verbal and non-verbal elements in order to keep mutual understanding (Galaczi & Taylor, 2020; Tai & Dai, 2023).

These skills are especially critical in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts, where opportunities for authentic language use outside the classroom are very restricted, as is the case in countries such as Iraq. In such environments, learners depend almost entirely on classroom-based interactions to develop their conversational skills; hence, the study of IC in these contexts is particularly apposite. In SLA, IC is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct that embraces various communicative skills: these skills enable learners to coordinate with interlocutors, manage conversational breakdowns, and negotiate meaning—all of which underlie successful spoken interactions (Roever & Kasper, 2018). Notably, the remedial actions following the breakdown in conversation, such as the clarification of misunderstandings or even corrections, are important aspects of IC; however, research shows that EFL learners usually do not develop this skill due to limited exposure to authentic interactional contexts (Byun et al., 2018; Roever & Dai, 2022). Furthermore, advanced skills, such as turn management—when to speak and how to yield the floor to others—are crucial but very difficult to acquire in a classroom, where interactions are often more controlled and less representative of natural conversational dynamics (Nguyen, 2012).

For Iraqi EFL learners, whose exposure to English-speaking environments outside of structured learning settings is quite limited, IC becomes a vital area of focus for developing communicative competence in both academic and real-world settings. The rise in virtual learning platforms brought an added layer of complexity to the development of IC. Unlike in FTF classrooms, virtual environments often lack the immediacy and richness of non-verbal cues that help to coordinate interactions (Means et al., 2010). According to previous research, virtual settings may present unique challenges for EFL learners in areas such as the handling of turn-taking and the interpretation of non-verbal signals, which may be reduced or entirely lacking in online interactions (Chan & Walsh, 2023; Tai & Dai, 2023). In this respect, the change in learning context to online, speeded up by COVID-19, has forced the need to understand these environments' effects on the interactional skills of learners. For example, in the study by Byun et al. (2018), it was indicated that EFL learners in virtual environments exhibited significant differences in the use of IC components in breakdown repairs and conversational flow maintenance compared to face-to-face environments. Specifically, this study investigates how Iraqi elementary and advanced EFL learners exhibit IC in both face-to-face and virtual environments. More specifically, it explores how learners at these two levels manage the constituent parts of IC, such as turn-taking, topic management, and repair mechanisms, while performing tasks like opinion exchange and jigsaw tasks. A number of studies have shown that opinion exchange tasks, which require learners to explicate and negotiate their own opinions, lead to more interactional engagement.

On the other hand, jigsaw tasks—whereby participants must piece together information—strongly emphasize structured communication and the need for explicit interlocutor coordination (e.g., Byun et al., 2018; Chan & Walsh, 2023). In such a way, a more comprehensive comparison of how different types of tasks and learning environments influence learners' IC—hence implying pedagogical strategies that can be adjusted to support IC development at school—is warranted. It is hoped that the insights obtained from the present study will contribute to EFL pedagogy design

supporting IC development in diverse learning environments. More precisely, understanding IC differences across virtual and face-to-face settings allows teachers to frame their instructional approach according to the specific demands of each setting.

Research has shown that virtual learning requires more scaffolding and specific strategies for teaching IC, especially in the absence of non-verbal clues (Roever & Dai, 2022; Chan & Walsh, 2023). The findings of this study may have some practical implications for the design of virtual learning modules that effectively promote IC and help Iraqi learners—and EFL learners more generally—to handle the demands of real-life communication with more confidence and competence. This study, therefore, joins a growing body of research in the field of interactional competence in language learning, especially in increasing virtual learning (Pekarek et al., 2018; Galaczi & Taylor, 2020; Roever & Kasper, 2018). As such, the present research will also fill the gap in the literature with regard to Iraqi EFL learners since not many studies have focused on the challenges and opportunities brought about by both virtual and face-to-face environments for learners from this demographic. The present study should, therefore, contribute to informing the development of EFL teaching methods that promote interactional competence in both traditional and digital platforms and prepare learners for successful communication in a variety of settings.

Interactional Competence in EFL Contexts

Interactional Competence is the set of conversational skills that enable active participation in spoken interactions. It incorporates, among other things, topic management, turn management, interactive listening, breakdown repair, and the use of non-verbal behaviors (Galaczi & Taylor, 2020). For Iraqi EFL learners, whose exposure to English is limited outside the classroom environment, IC becomes of major importance in developing conversational skills needed for life-like situations.

Given the growing number of virtual learning environments, especially post-pandemic, it's a question of how these environments impact IC in language acquisition and pedagogy.

Face-to-Face vs. Virtual Learning Environments A Face-to-face learning environment presents real-time interactions where non-verbal clues, immediate feedback, and turn-taking strategies allow for smoother communication (McCarthy, 2002). Most VLEs lack such FTF immediacy and physical cues. On the other hand, VLEs offer some unique benefits: extended access and possible incorporations of useful digital resources provide learners with more possibilities of better self-directional control and wider exposition to language materials (Means et al., 2010).

This study explores how these two environments influence Iraqi EFL learners' IC, taking into account differences in task performance at the elementary and advanced levels.

The Problem

Despite increased attention to interactional competence within EFL instruction, there remain fundamental gaps in our understanding of IC development and manifestation among Iraqi learners at elementary and advanced levels in unique learning environments. Research into IC has highlighted this competence as an integral part of communicative competence, which plays a crucial role in real-time language use and social interaction (Pekarek et al., 2018; Galaczi & Taylor, 2020).

For Iraqi EFL learners, however, the opportunities to interact outside of the classroom are rather limited; therefore, authentic interaction—a vital component on which nuanced skills included in IC, such as turn management, conversational breakdown repair, and topic coherence, are built—does not exist in real life (Roever & Kasper, 2018; Chan & Walsh, 2023). This limited exposure to authentic language environments constrains learners' potential to acquire and practice these vital conversational skills effectively. Previous studies have documented various challenges

faced by Iraqi EFL learners, including difficulties related to the pragmatic aspects of language use and managing interactions in unfamiliar contexts (Zughoul, 2003; Abdul Razak et al., 2018). These challenges are compounded in virtual learning settings, where contextual cues—such as non-verbal gestures and immediate feedback—are reduced or even completely lacking, therefore making it difficult for learners to be fully engaged and to manage conversations effectively (Tai & Dai, 2023; Roever & Dai, 2022). This often calls for added competencies in managing longer pauses, interpreting limited visual cues, and dealing with platform-related delays that can further impede learners' ability to develop IC (Byun et al., 2018).

Research also shows that elementary learners, especially, have problems with repair mechanisms and interactive listening skills in virtual environments where the flow of conversation is more subject to breakdowns compared to face-to-face in-class interactions (Nguyen, 2012; Means et al., 2010). This study fills these gaps by focusing on the particular IC challenges that elementary and advanced Iraqi EFL learners face in both face-to-face and virtual learning environments. Given its focus on these two proficiency levels, the study strives to create a nuanced view of how learners at different stages engage and manage conversational dynamics in different settings.

This is important because recent findings show that virtual and face-to-face settings support IC development in different ways, with face-to-face settings more conducive to immediate feedback and the virtual setting more dependent on self-regulation and adaptiveness (Pekarek et al., 2018; Galaczi & Taylor, 2020). By investigating these IC differences, this study seeks to inform instructional practices that better support Iraqi EFL learners' conversational abilities in both traditional and digital contexts. Insights from this research could lead to targeted pedagogical interventions that address specific IC challenges associated with each learning environment. These findings can contribute to EFL instruction in that educators can use the strategies that would encourage IC development specifically for Iraqi learners with the view of supporting these learners in the achievement of effective communication in a variety of real-life contexts.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are as follows:

--To find out whether there are differences in the frequency of IC components, namely, topic management, turn management, non-verbal behavior, breakdown repair, and interactive listening among Iraqi elementary and advanced EFL learners in face-to-face learning environments.

--To determine if similar differences exist in virtual learning spaces.

--To identify how task type (opinion exchange vs. jigsaw tasks) along with the learning environment impacts IC in order to better inform EFL pedagogy.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The present study sought to address the following research questions and hypotheses:

RQ1. Is there any significant difference between the interactional competence components used by Iraqi elementary and advanced EFL learners in face-to-face learning environments?

RQ2: Are the interactional competence components used in virtual learning environments significantly different for these learners?

Ho1: There is no significant difference between elementary and advanced learners in the use of IC components in face-to-face learning environments.

Ho2. There is no difference between elementary and advanced learners regarding the usage of IC components in a virtual learning environment.

Review of Literature

Interactional competence comprises a set of conversation skills that allow learners to take part in and control spoken interaction effectively. The central elements of IC, which include turn-taking, topic management, non-verbal behavior, and breakdown repair, are constituents of the smooth flow and coherence of interaction necessary for real-time communication (Galaczi & Taylor, 2018; Roever & Kasper, 2018). For example, turn-taking skills enable speakers to know when to take or give up turns, and topic management skills enable them to maintain a topic and appropriately change topics within the conversation (Byun et al., 2018). Non-verbal behaviors include eye contact and gestures, which provide important contextual clues, especially in face-to-face settings. Repair mechanisms are very crucial, allowing (or, if needed, enabling) one to handle any misunderstandings or conversational breakdowns (Tai & Dai, 2023). Recent literature has identified these aspects as key to IC, particularly as the field of SLA increasingly embraces the view that context-sensitive, co-constructed language use is crucial (Pekarek et al., 2018). This review considers both theoretical and empirical contributions to IC, its assessment, and the development of these skills in EFL contexts with particular attention to differences in proficiency levels and learning environment effects.

Theoretical Background

The concept of interactional competence, which was introduced by Kramsch (1986) and more extensively developed by Hall and Pekarek Doehler (2011), frames language learning as a collaborative, socially situated practice. Unlike traditional models that focus solely on individual linguistic knowledge, IC theory highlights relational aspects of language use in which meaning is co-constructed between interlocutors (Hall & Pekarek Doehler, 2011).

This theoretical approach draws from sociocultural learning theories and conversation analysis, in which language acquisition is viewed as an interactive process influenced by social context and the speaker's ability to interpret and respond to verbal and non-verbal cues (Mondada, 2011; Streeck, 2013). IC theories posit that learners develop competence, not just in terms of grammar and vocabulary, but in actually taking part in socially structured conversation, where they become capable of handling interactions in context-sensitive ways (Pekarek et al., 2018). Despite this fact, IC research has overwhelmingly focused on how learners negotiate various conversational actions—such as initiating, sustaining, or closing an interaction—and repair when there is a misunderstanding or failed transmission of information (Roever & Dai, 2022). According to sociocultural theory, these competencies are acquired via guided practice in real-life contexts; hence, task-based approaches to language learning emanate from this tradition in an attempt to simulate real-life communicative situations (Nguyen, 2012). In this regard, IC has been at the forefront of SLA research and pedagogy within recent years, especially since its handling of conversational demands pertains to an environment moving from face-to-face classrooms to virtual classrooms. Empirical Background

Empirical Background

Interactional competence often examined the aspects of turn-taking, interactive listening, and repair mechanisms; these studies have shown that learners manifest different degrees of competence depending on their level of proficiency, exposure to authentic contexts of language use, and learning environment (Byun et al., 2018; Gan et al., 2009). For example, advanced learners reportedly make use of more effective turn-taking and repair strategies compared to elementary learners, who often have difficulty handling conversation turns and reacting to misunderstandings (Roever & Kasper, 2018). In this regard, during face-to-face, learners can take advantage of immediate feedback and contextual support from their interlocutors—like facial expressions and gestures—to manage a more fluid conversation (Means et al., 2010).

Contrastingly, virtual learning environments give rise to challenges in maintaining IC. 'Research suggests that in VLEs, problems are created through the absence of immediate physical cues and possible technical disruptions during turn-taking and non-verbal communication' (Chan & Walsh, 2023). Tai and Dai (2023) point out that EFL learners in virtual settings are more likely to experience delayed conversational flow. Byun et al. (2018) demonstrated that learners in virtual environments rely more on verbal clarification and repair strategies, which are important to manage the interaction when visual information or non-verbal information is not accessible. The results indicate that virtual and face-to-face settings present different challenges and opportunities for IC development, especially for learners at lower levels of proficiency.

Research has also shown the role of task types in IC development, such as opinion exchange and jigsaw tasks. The latter requires learners to articulate and negotiate personal opinions, which often gives rise to more complex interactional demands, especially in virtual environments where scaffolding for IC is less likely to exist (Pekarek et al., 2018). In contrast, jigsaw tasks involve a collaborative assembly of information, which encourages learners to engage actively with the interlocutors and possibly develop their turn-taking and repair skills (Nguyen, 2012).

Gap in the Literature

Despite a substantial body of research into IC, few studies specifically investigate IC development among Iraqi EFL learners, and none compare face-to-face with virtual learning contexts while also examining proficiency levels. Most were conducted in Western or East Asian contexts, so there is little understanding of the exact ways in which Iraqi EFL learners adjust their interactional strategies across these environments (Abdul Razak et al., 2018; Zughoul, 2003). Moreover, few studies have investigated how elementary and advanced learners differ in their use of IC components, such as turn management and breakdown repair, in virtual versus face-to-face contexts. This article aims to close this gap by comparing these environments with respect to their effects on IC among Iraqi learners and thereby yielding insights that may inform targeted instructional practices designed to support their conversational performance across different learning settings.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a comparative research design using mixed methods to analyze IC in two different learning environments: face-to-face and virtual learning environments. Since the mixed-method approach enables both the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data, this offers greater coverage of IC components as they manifest in distinct settings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative data were obtained through statistical measures of IC components, such as turn-taking and topic management. Qualitative data were obtained through thematic analysis, which examined patterns in the interactive behavior of the learners across tasks. Such a design follows recent SLA studies that emphasize the importance of including both quantitative and qualitative methods, as nuances and context in IC development would otherwise remain elusive (Pekarek et al., 2018; Roever & Kasper, 2018).

Corpus of the Study

The corpus consisted of recorded interactions of a total of 100 Iraqi EFL learners, with an equal number of 50 elementary-level and 50 advanced-level participants. Each learner participated in opinion exchange and jigsaw tasks—tasks chosen for their potential to elicit a number of IC components.

Opinion exchange tasks forced the learners to clearly state and negotiate their opinions, which led them to engage in turn-taking and interactive listening; on the other hand, jigsaw tasks encouraged collaborative communication and breakdown repair, as participants had to reconstruct a whole picture from the fragments presented (Galaczi & Taylor, 2020; Byun et al., 2018). Recordings were conducted in both FTF and VLE settings to allow cross-environmental comparison of the manifestations of IC. This approach is based on literature emphasizing the critical role of task-based assessment in eliciting learners' communicative competencies (Nguyen, 2012).

Model of the Study

In this study, the model of interactional competence proposed by Galaczi and Taylor was applied, in particular, to major IC components: topic management, turn management, breakdown repair, interactive listening, and nonverbal behaviors. This approach was chosen with consideration of its appropriateness in assessing how learners manage to meet interactional demands in the pressures of real-time communication, with special emphasis on different levels of proficiency and environments (Galaczi & Taylor, 2018). Turn management was measured by looking at learners' ability to initiate and maintain conversational turns; topic management was gauged by their ability to introduce and keep relevant discussion topics; and breakdown repair was measured by the way in which learners addressed misunderstandings and interruptions. Non-verbal behaviors were only observed in FTF settings due to the limited visibility in VLEs. This is consistent with some recent findings regarding the role of non-verbal cues in IC (Chan & Walsh, 2023; Roever & Dai, 2022).

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through audio and video recordings of the learners' interactions in both FTF and VLE settings. All interactions were transcribed to capture both the verbal and non-verbal aspects of IC, where applicable. To ensure consistency, tasks were standardized in an attempt to reduce interactional variations unrelated to the focus of the study (Pekarek et al., 2018).

Following recent methodological recommendations for SLA studies, the task environment, instructions, and interaction prompts were identical in both settings, enabling a fair comparison to be made (cf. Means et al., 2010; Roever & Kasper, 2018).

Data Analysis Methods

A mixed-method approach was followed in the analysis of the collected data. The quantitative analysis included calculations of mean scores for the IC components between the elementary and advanced groups within each environment. Statistical tests, such as t-tests, were conducted to assess the significant differences between the groups (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Qualitative data were analyzed through thematic coding to identify the recurring interactional patterns and behaviors across the tasks, capturing nuances in how learners modulated their interactional strategies in FTF versus VLE contexts. This approach is consistent with studies emphasizing the importance of thematic analysis for capturing the context-sensitive nature of IC (e.g., Byun et al., 2018; Nguyen, 2012).

Results

Results for Research Question 1 (Face-to-Face Environment)

IC Component\tElementary Mean (FTF)\tAdvanced Mean (FTF)\tp-value

Topic Management	2.3	3.8	< 0.05
Turn Management	2.1	4.1	< 0.05
Interactive Listening	1.9	3.5	< 0.05

It means that, in the face-to-face environment, advanced learners showed significantly higher levels of proficiency in all IC components than the elementary learners, with the biggest differences observed in turn management and interactive listening ($p < 0.05$). These results are consistent with recent research, indicating that advanced learners cope, in general, more successfully with the management of conversational turns and interactive listening—skills likely to be honed in face-to-face settings through immediate feedback and non-verbal clues (e.g., Galaczi & Taylor, 2020; Tai & Dai, 2023). The advanced learners also handled the topics more successfully, indicative of the ability to sustain and adapt topics in dynamic conversation, an ability critical to authentic communicative competence (Roever & Kasper, 2018).

Results for Research Question 2 (Virtual Learning Environment)

IC Component Elementary Mean (VLE) Advanced Mean (VLE) p-value
Topic Management 1.7 3.2 < 0.05 Turn Management 1.9 3.6 < 0.05
Breakdown Repair 2.0 3.3 < 0.05

Elementary learners, in contrast to advanced learners, struggled most in the virtual learning environment, given the particularly large gap in topic management and breakdown repair ($p < 0.05$). Advanced learners showed stronger IC across the components, suggesting that higher proficiency may offset some of the limitations imposed by VLEs, such as the lack of non-verbal cues and increased potential for conversational breakdowns (Means et al., 2010; Chan & Walsh, 2023). The lower scores of elementary learners in breakdown repair point to a struggle of managing conversational disruptions, which is in line with recent research suggesting that VLEs may increase challenges for lower-proficiency learners by reducing the possibility of immediate feedback and support through non-verbal means (Byun et al., 2018; Roever & Dai, 2022).

These results bring into sharp relief the need for tailored IC instruction in virtual environments for elementary learners, where structured support may help them negotiate the interactional difficulties more characteristic of VLEs. More generally, advanced learners performed better in turn management and breakdown repair, which suggests that a higher level of proficiency enables more adaptive interactional strategies in contexts lacking immediate non-verbal cues.

Discussion

Discussion Related to Hypothesis 1

The results indicate that, in face-to-face settings, the advanced learners outperformed the elementary learners on all IC components, with especially large differences in the area of turn management and interactive listening. The findings are in line with recent studies reporting that, at higher levels of proficiency, learners can manage conversational turns more appropriately, sustain topic coherence better, and engage in interactive listening more effectively (Galaczi & Taylor, 2020; Pekarek et al., 2018). Advanced learners have an advantage concerning IC in face-to-face settings because of their experience with non-verbal skills, which provide critical contextual support while speaking (Nakatsuhara et al., 2018; Means et al., 2010). For instance, turn management—learners need to recognize subtle cues about when to speak or yield the floor—is an ability less available to elementary learners who may still be developing the underlying IC abilities (Roever & Kasper, 2018). The significant difference between proficiency levels observed in face-to-face environments also supports the view that immediate, context-rich feedback enhances IC development, particularly for advanced learners who can take advantage of non-verbal cues like eye contact and gestures to manage conversational flow effectively (Tai & Dai, 2023).

These results are indicative of the fact that face-to-face learning environments afford unique advantages for the development of IC, particularly for learners who have reached a high level of language proficiency (Byun et al., 2018). For elementary learners, additional scaffolding in face-to-face settings might be needed to support their engagement with turn-taking and topic management—two essential components of IC that still appear challenging at lower levels of proficiency (Nguyen, 2012).

Discussion Related to Hypothesis 2

More advanced learners continued to demonstrate higher IC in virtual settings, such as successful turn management and repair of conversational breakdown, which is consistent with some literature in virtual language learning that notes that overcoming the limitations of the virtual environment—which can include delay in feedback and lessened visual support—may require and/or enable higher levels of proficiency (e.g., Chan & Walsh, 2023; Means et al., 2010). Advanced learners' ability to adjust their IC strategies to virtual settings, therefore, flags the fact that they are capable of compensating for the lack of nonverbal information by resorting to verbal strategies, such as clarification and confirmation, in order to ensure understanding and coherence (Pekarek Doehler & Berger, 2018; Roever & Dai, 2022).

In contrast, it was the elementary learners who had more difficulties in virtual environments, especially in topic management and breakdown repair, which involve more cognitive and interactional agility (Byun et al., 2018). Lacking the visual signals available in face-to-face interactions, elementary learners often were unable to signal comprehension or initiate repairs. This supports Nguyen (2012), who shows that less proficient learners benefit from more scaffolding in the virtual environment in order to cope with these demands.

The data, hence, showed a clear indication for targeted IC support for elementary learners in virtual settings through structured activity and progression to develop repair strategies and turn-taking in digital communication.

Conclusion

This paper brings into focus the impact of learning environments and levels of proficiency on interactional competence amongst Iraqi EFL learners. The results indicate that advanced learners had higher IC in both face-to-face and virtual environments but excelled in the face-to-face environment with better performance in turn management and interactive listening skills. In contrast, elementary learners experienced more difficulties, especially in the virtual environment, where the lack of non-verbal expression exacerbated problems related to topic management and repair devices. These findings suggest that there is a need to tailor IC instruction, particularly for young elementary learners in virtual learning contexts. The present study brings into the recent body of SLA literature a spotlight on the main role that IC plays in language development and further underlines the importance of adaptive pedagogical strategies in diverse learning settings.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this research suggest the application of IC-related tasks in EFL teaching, particularly for assisting elementary-level students with topic management and turn-taking. In virtual settings, where non-verbal information is scarce, it may be the case that explicit training in turn-taking and repair strategies could enhance IC for less proficient learners (Roever & Dai, 2022; Tai & Dai, 2023).

Task-based learning activities that simulate real-world interactions could provide opportunities for learners to practice and internalize these skills (Galaczi & Taylor, 2020). Practical Implications: EFL teachers should consider including focused training in virtual learning environments on non-verbal communication strategies, repair mechanisms, and

techniques associated with dealing with delayed feedback. Such training might involve digital resources or platforms enabling virtual role-play activities and interactional feedback in developing competencies more fitting for online communication (Chan & Walsh, 2023; Nguyen, 2012).

The present research exclusively targeted Iraqi EFL learners, and such a sampling characteristic might restrain the generalizability of the findings in relation to other cultural or linguistic learning backgrounds. Besides, the cross-sectional design of the study captured IC at one point in time and failed to longitudinally trace its development. Hence, future research should longitudinally trace changes in IC over time, adopting a longitudinal approach that might shed light on how the interactional skills of learners evolve as a function of continuous practice and exposure to varying environments. Delimitation of the Study The present study was constrained to elementary and advanced learners, with no intermediate levels represented, which may limit generalizability across the entire proficiency spectrum. What is more, only two types of tasks were used: opinion exchange and jigsaw. This would not represent, to the full extent, IC skills that learners manifest in various contexts. Future research can employ more tasks in order to generalize the ability in IC across a range of different communication contexts.

Suggestions for Further Research

Future research may investigate the longitudinal development of specific IC components, such as non-verbal behavior and breakdown repair. Investigating IC differences in a wider range of proficiency levels and task types may give further insight into how the learning environment and demands of the task shape IC development. Such research may eventually lead to an overall pedagogy that guides the growth of IC at different levels of proficiency and in varied learning contexts. These extensions result from the latest research findings and allow a more nuanced discussion, implications, and areas of future inquiry in the field of interactional competence of EFL learners across both face-to-face and virtual environments.

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