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Bridging Cultural Gaps: An Analysis of Cross-Cultural Communication Competence at the University of Halabja

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ABSTRACT

This study explores cross-cultural communication competence (CCC) at the University of Halabja in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, where increasing cultural and linguistic diversity has created both valuable learning opportunities and notable communication challenges in academic settings. As higher education institutions in the region become more internationally and regionally diverse, understanding students' and lecturers' intercultural readiness has become essential. The study adopts a descriptive survey design and employs an online questionnaire adapted from Chen and Starosta's Intercultural Sensitivity Scale and Matveev and Nelson's CCC model. The questionnaire was distributed to 100 students and lecturers from various academic backgrounds who were conveniently selected. Frequency analysis revealed that most participants recognize the influence of culture on communication, demonstrate respect toward individuals from diverse backgrounds, and report patience in unfamiliar intercultural interactions, indicating relatively strong cognitive awareness and affective orientation. However, a high proportion of neutral responses regarding cooperation, flexibility, and willingness to engage in culturally challenging situations suggests uncertainty when participants face complex or unfamiliar intercultural tasks. Qualitative responses further highlighted respect, active listening, and adaptability as essential intercultural skills, although many respondents reported limited direct experience with intercultural conflict. Overall, the findings indicate a moderate level of cross-cultural communication competence: awareness and attitudes are evident, but behavioral confidence remains inconsistent. These baseline findings contribute to the limited empirical literature on CCC in Kurdish higher education

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and inform practical recommendations, including the integration of intercultural modules into curricula, the promotion of mixed-culture learning activities, and the implementation of scenario-based training to translate positive attitudes into effective communicative behavior.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Communication; Cultural Competence; Intercultural Communication; University of Halabja; Cultural Awareness; Teamwork; Adaptability; Kurdistan Region

1. Introduction

In today's interconnected and globalized world, the ability to communicate across cultural boundaries has become a vital skill in both educational and professional environments. Cross-cultural communication competence (CCC) refers to an individual's ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds. This competence involves cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components, such as awareness, sensitivity, and the skillful use of communication strategies^[1,2].

At the heart of CCC is the need to understand and appreciate cultural differences in communication styles, values, and expectations. Miscommunication often arises when individuals interpret messages based on their own cultural norms without understanding those of the receiver. As Aririguzoh^[3] explains, globalization has brought people from diverse backgrounds together, increasing the potential for misunderstanding due to cultural assumptions embedded in communication patterns. These differences can hinder effective message exchange, reduce cooperation, and create barriers to social integration, especially in multicultural settings, like universities.

The University of Halabja, located in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, has become increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse over the past decade due to the expansion of higher education and the growing adoption of English as a medium of instruction, attracting students and faculty from different regions and linguistic backgrounds. This growing diversity offers valuable learning opportunities, but also brings challenges that may affect collaboration and academic performance. Research shows that cultural diversity can enhance creativity and problem-solving in teams, but only when there is effective communication and mutual understanding among team members^[4].

Without CCC, multicultural teams and groups are vulnerable to conflict, reduced cohesion, and lower performance^[5]. Furthermore, cultural awareness plays a major

role in shaping students' and professionals' readiness to engage in cross-cultural settings. As Zlomislić et al.^[6] point out, education, particularly intercultural education, significantly improves cultural sensitivity and prepares individuals to live, study, or work abroad. It is not enough to have language skills alone; one must also understand the cultural norms and values that influence how messages are sent, received, and interpreted. Communication patterns such as directness, formality, or emotional expression vary greatly across cultures^[7,8], which can lead to confusion or conflict without proper training and awareness.

In the context of Kurdish universities, there has been limited research into how these cross-cultural dynamics play out. Most existing CCC frameworks have been developed in Western contexts and may not fully address the cultural realities in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region^[2,9]. This gap is especially relevant for institutions like the University of Halabja, where the convergence of different ethnicities, languages, and educational backgrounds creates a unique set of intercultural challenges.

This study is important because it seeks to explore how students and faculty at the University of Halabja perceive and experience cross-cultural communication. By identifying the barriers and supports related to CCC in this context, the research will contribute to improved communication strategies, inclusive education practices, and more effective academic collaboration in culturally diverse institutions.

1.1. Problem Statement

Although the University of Halabja is becoming more culturally diverse, effective interaction among students and faculty remains a major concern. The growing presence of individuals from various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds has not been matched with sufficient policies or programs to promote intercultural understanding and communication skills. This lack results in unmet communication expectations, frequent misunderstandings, and feelings of alienation.

Students and faculty may face challenges related to language barriers, cultural misinterpretations, and differing academic and social norms, including gender-related expectations and religion-influenced practices, which can shape classroom interaction, communication styles, and patterns of participation.

These challenges negatively affect not only educational performance but also the development of relationships and teamwork in academic projects. Despite its significance, cross-cultural communication competence remains an under-researched area in Kurdish universities, including the University of Halabja. This gap in the literature limits understanding of the specific communication needs of the university community. Hence, this research aims to fill that void and propose strategies for developing an inclusive, communicatively effective academic environment.

1.2. Research Question

The research is guided by the following questions:

1. What are the key barriers to effective cross-cultural communication within the university?
2. What factors contribute positively to successful cross-cultural communication at the university?
3. How can the university support students in improving their cross-cultural communication skills?

1.3. Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to understand how well students and teachers at the University of Halabja communicate with people from different cultures. To achieve this objective, the study will focus on the following:

- Check how good students and staff are at cross-cultural communication, by looking at how well they understand other cultures, how they communicate, and how open they are to people from different backgrounds.

Finding out that cross-cultural communication difficulties in university settings stem from multiple interrelated factors, including varying levels of language proficiency, differences in academic discourse conventions, culturally shaped interaction styles, and contrasting expectations regarding classroom participation, feedback, and authority.

These factors collectively influence how students and faculty interpret, negotiate, and engage in academic communication.

- This includes problems like language differences, misunderstandings about culture, and different expectations in behavior and academics.
- Look into what helps improve communication between people from different cultures, like language classes, cultural awareness programs, or events that help students and teachers connect.
- Suggest ways to improve communication at the university, such as offering training programs or creating helpful policies for better intercultural understanding.

1.4. Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study will focus only on the student population at the University of Halabja, who predominantly come from middle- to lower-middle-income families, reflecting the broader socioeconomic conditions of the Halabja Governorate. Many students rely on family support and, in some cases, part-time employment or government stipends to finance their studies.

It will look at how well students and teachers from different cultural backgrounds communicate with each other. A small group of students and staff will be chosen to take part in the research. Their experiences, opinions, and the problems they face in communication will be studied. While the main focus will be on communication related to learning and teaching, the study will also include social interactions to give a full picture of how people communicate at the university.

However, the study has some limitations. First, only a small number of participants will be involved because of limited time and resources, which means the results might not represent everyone at the university. Second, the study will be done in English and Kurdish, so there might be some misunderstandings or limited responses due to differences in language skills. Lastly, since the research is focused only on the University of Halabja, the results may not apply to other universities or regions with different cultures.

Even with these challenges, the study hopes to give useful insights into communication across cultures at the university and help improve how people from different backgrounds interact in higher education in the region.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Developing Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC)

Barker's study^[2] focuses on building intercultural communication skills, paying special attention to the differences in how people from various cultures communicate. Barker^[2] notes that beliefs, values, traditions, and norms help create good connections between different cultures. Having a positive attitude and being open-minded can help people connect better by accepting, understanding, and respecting each other. When people from a host culture interact with immigrants, they can observe their behaviors, such as body language, how they speak, and nonverbal signals. These behaviors are important for understanding how well the person can connect with the host culture and handle intercultural interactions^[2].

Matveev and Nelson's research^[4] looks at cross-cultural communication skills and how well multicultural teams work together. Their research focuses on how these skills affect the performance of teams with members from different cultures, specifically American and Russian managers. They use the Cross-Cultural Communication Competence Model, which highlights both the differences and similarities between American and Russian managers. Understanding these differences and similarities is important for improving flexibility and teamwork in a multicultural workplace^[4]. Developing these communication skills is essential for promoting mutual understanding and cooperation between different cultural groups, leading to better communication and teamwork.

2.2. Intercultural Adaptation and Communication Competence

Aririguzoh^[3] looks at how immigrants adjust to a new culture and highlights the importance of communication. Good communication helps people engage in their new environment and learn the local language. Intercultural adjustment involves four stages: acculturation (learning one's native culture), deculturation (forgetting aspects of the native culture), adaptation (adopting the host culture), and assimilation (full integration). During this process, people often feel pressure when trying to fit into a new culture. A key part of adapting is learning how to communicate effectively in the

new culture, which can be done by talking with locals and using media such as TV, radio, or the internet. Host communication skills show how well an immigrant adapts and predict their overall adjustment. Psychological adjustment has major effects on immigrants, especially children, who may face challenges such as language barriers, loss of social relationships, class differences, and changes in family roles.

These changes can cause stress, anxiety, or depression. Some children cope better than others, but some face significant problems, especially if they feel caught between two cultures. Parents play an important role in their children's adaptation. If parents have adapted well, they can guide their children and set a good example. However, if parents and children adapt at different speeds, conflicts can arise. For instance, parents who hold firmly to their original culture might see their children's new behaviors as betrayal, while children might feel misunderstood or unsupported. This dynamic can lead to family tension and negatively impact the child's mental health^[3].

2.3. Psychological Adjustment and Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Chen et al.^[9] looked at how well Chinese immigrant children adjust to their new lives in Canada. They found that these children often face problems like language difficulties, losing friends, and differences in school and family roles. These changes can cause stress, anxiety, and depression, especially when children try to balance their old culture with the new one. According to Lee and Song^[10], cultural factors like individualism (focusing on oneself) versus collectivism (focusing on the group) and high-context (indirect) versus low-context (direct) communication styles affect how people understand and react to messages. Fang and Baker^[11] also stressed the importance of context in communication, as people from different cultures might see the same words or actions in different ways. Misunderstandings in intercultural communication can lead to confusion, conflict, and misinterpretation^[12]. For example, actions that are polite in one culture might be rude in another^[7]. Being aware of cultural differences can help avoid misunderstandings and encourage respectful and inclusive relationships^[13]. Gopal^[14] emphasizes the importance of intercultural communication skills, such as active listening, empathy, and adaptability. By improving these skills and understanding cultural differences,

immigrant children can better adjust to their new environment and feel more stable emotionally^[9].

2.4. Education and Cross-Cultural Communication Competence

Deardorff and Arasaratnam-Smith^[15] talk about how important it is to be able to communicate across cultures. They focus on how learning about music and art can help people understand different cultures better. Their study looks at how schools can teach students to communicate with people from different backgrounds. Zlomislić et al.^[6] also stress the need for cultural competence.

They mention that there's not enough teaching about different cultures in universities, especially in Croatia. With globalization, it's more important than ever to understand different cultures, whether at work, school, or in social settings. The authors suggest that studying abroad or taking intercultural courses can improve cultural understanding and sensitivity^[6,15].

2.5. The Role of Globalization and Sustainable Development in Intercultural Communication

The United Nations (UN) has shown that culture is very important for sustainable development. UNESCO says that culture is not just a small part of development but a key factor in social change. Being aware of different cultures and having good communication skills are important for bringing people together and improving global cooperation. Gopal and Senyuva^[16] studies how people understand and connect with others through cultural communication. According to Lee and Song^[10], cultural dimensions, like individualism versus collectivism and high-context versus low-context communication, influence how messages are understood. Fang and Baker^[11] emphasizes that the context of communication matters since people from different cultures might see the same message in different ways. Misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication often come from these differences, leading to conflicts and misinterpretations. Günçavdi and Can^[17] point out that people who are culturally aware can better handle these challenges and build stronger relationships. Deardorff^[13] argues that having intercultural skills, such as active listening and empathy, is essential for

improving communication across cultures. Globalization means that people and organizations need to develop strong cross-cultural communication skills to manage the complexities of today's world. Good cross-cultural communication encourages mutual respect and improves global cooperation, which helps in achieving sustainable development and social harmony.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study uses a survey method with a structured questionnaire to measure how well students and faculty at the University of Halabja communicate across different cultures. This approach enables us to understand people's attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions, allowing for statistical analysis to reveal how various factors are related.

The questionnaire, which will be shared online through Google Forms, uses a Likert scale. This scale is great for measuring how much someone agrees or disagrees with specific statements and is useful for assessing various aspects of communication skills. Key areas of intercultural communication competence include intercultural awareness, sensitivity, and behavior. Drawing on well-established communication models, Chen and Starosta^[1] conceptualize intercultural communication competence primarily as an individual-level construct, emphasizing intercultural sensitivity, awareness, and affective readiness in cross-cultural interactions. In contrast, Matveev and Nelson^[4] adopt a more organizational and interactional perspective, focusing on communication effectiveness within culturally diverse teams and institutional settings. While the former highlights personal dispositions and attitudes, the latter emphasizes communicative practices and contextual dynamics. Together, these perspectives provide a complementary framework for examining cross-cultural communication challenges in university environments.

3.2. Population and Sampling

The study will focus on both undergraduate students and faculty members at the University of Halabja, who come from different cultural and language backgrounds. About 100 participants are expected to take part in the study. The sampling strategy will use convenience sampling, which is

common in exploratory research when it's hard to access the entire population. This sample size should be enough for statistical analysis and to represent the diverse environment of the university.

3.3. Instrumentation

The questionnaire will have two main parts. The first part will gather demographic information like age, gender, whether the participant is a student or faculty member, their field of study, and their language background. The second part will focus on cross-cultural communication skills, using a five-point Likert scale from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree."

Although the questionnaire was informed by established instruments such as the Cross-Cultural Communication Competence (CCC) framework, the items were adapted, simplified, and contextualized to suit undergraduate students. Graduate students were not included due to their limited number at the University of Halabja and the study's focus on the dominant undergraduate population. A pilot study confirmed that the questions were clear, accessible, and appropriate for undergraduate respondents. The items are adapted from established tools like the Cross-Cultural Communication Competence (CCC) scale by Matveev and Nelson^[4], which measures skills like interpersonal communication, teamwork, cultural empathy, and the ability to handle cultural differences. Before using the full questionnaire, it will be tested to make sure the questions are clear, reliable, and relevant to the context.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

The survey will be conducted online using Google Forms, making it easy for participants to access and complete. Invitations to take part in the survey will be sent out by sharing the survey link with the participants through WhatsApp and social media. The introduction in the form will explain the study's goals and assure participants that their information will be kept confidential. Participation is completely voluntary, and participants will need to give their consent digitally before starting the questionnaire.

The data collection period will last about one to two weeks, giving participants enough time to respond. Reminders will be sent periodically to encourage more people

to participate.

3.5. Data Analysis

Once all the data has been collected, the responses will be assessed, and frequencies will be analyzed from the graphs generated in the Google form, and later the observations will be discussed based on the analyzed graphs.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

All participants will be informed that their responses are anonymous and confidential. The collected data will be securely stored and used only for academic purposes related to this study. No identifying information will be disclosed in any publications or presentations.

4. Results

4.1. Demographics

The pie chart below (Figure 1) shows the age distribution of 100 participants who took part in the study. The largest group of respondents, 56%, were aged between 21 and 23 years, shown in red. This indicates that the majority of the participants are in their early twenties. The second largest group, making up 28% of the total, was 24 years old and above, represented in orange. This suggests that a significant portion of participants are older, possibly postgraduate students or working individuals. Finally, the smallest group, only 16%, was between 18 and 20 years old, shown in blue. This shows that fewer younger individuals were involved in the study compared to the other age groups. Overall, the data shows that most of the participants were in the 21–23 age range, followed by those aged 24 and above, with the least number in the youngest group.

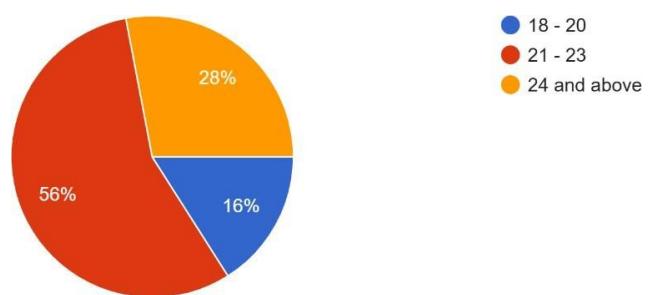


Figure 1. Participant age.

The figure below (**Figure 2**) displays the gender distribution of the 100 participants who took part in the study. A slightly higher number of respondents were male, making up 54% of the total, shown in blue. Females represented 46% of the participants, shown in red. This indicates that the study had a relatively balanced gender representation, with only a small difference between male and female participants. Such a balance is useful for comparing responses across genders in the analysis.

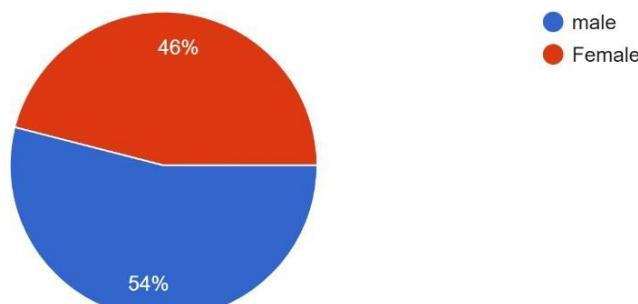


Figure 2. Participant gender.

The figure below (**Figure 3**) illustrates the university stage of the 100 participants involved in the study. The largest group of respondents was in their third year, accounting for 28% of the total, shown in orange. Second-year students followed closely with 25%, represented in red, while fourth-year students made up 20%, shown in green. First-year students were 18% of the participants, displayed in blue. A smaller group, 9%, were graduates, shown in purple. Overall, the chart shows a good mix of students from different university levels, with the majority currently enrolled and progressing through their studies. This distribution helps to get a broader understanding of student experiences across different academic stages.

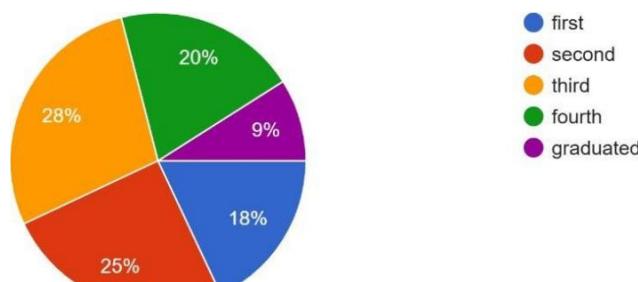


Figure 3. Participant university stage.

All participants shared the same first language, Kurdish (Sorani dialect), which is the dominant native language of students at the University of Halabja. This linguistic homo-

geneity allows for a more focused interpretation of self-rated English proficiency without the confounding influence of differing first-language backgrounds. The largest groups were Elementary and Pre-intermediate, each making up 24% of the total, shown in red and orange (**Figure 4**). This means almost half of the participants are still in the early stages of learning English. Intermediate learners came next with 23%, shown in green, which shows many are at a middle level. The beginner level was reported by 18% of the respondents, shown in blue. A smaller number, 6%, said they were Advanced (light blue), and only 5% were Upper Intermediate (purple). In summary, most participants are at the early or middle levels of English proficiency, with fewer at higher levels.

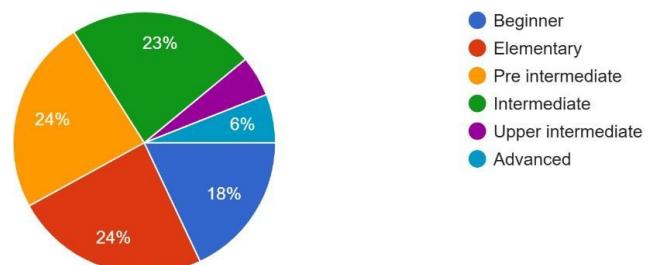


Figure 4. Participant proficiency level.

4.2. Different Communication Styles Based on Different Cultures

Based on the following figure (**Figure 5**), most participants agreed, with 49% selecting “Agree” (in red), and another 31% choosing “Strongly Agree” (in blue). This means a total of 80% of participants accept that cultural differences can affect how people communicate. 20% of respondents were neutral (orange), meaning they neither agreed nor disagreed. There were no responses for Disagree or Strongly Disagree, showing that none of the participants rejected the idea. Overall, this result shows that most people in the study are aware and respectful of cultural differences in communication.

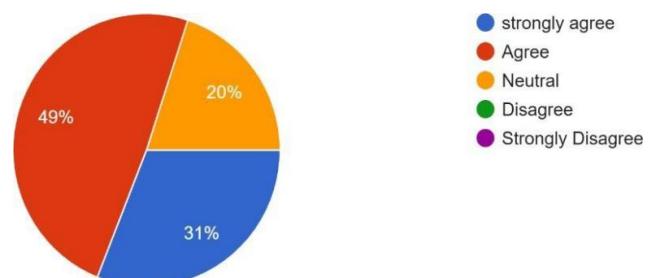


Figure 5. Different communication styles based on different cultures.

4.3. Misunderstandings Arising from Cultural Differences

As shown in **Figure 6**, nearly half of the participants (48%) responded with “Agree” (red), while 25% chose “Strongly Agree” (blue). This means that 73% of respondents feel confident in managing communication issues caused by cultural differences. Another 26% remained neutral (orange), suggesting they might be unsure of their ability or haven’t faced such situations often. A very small portion (1%) disagreed (green), and no one selected “Strongly Disagree,” showing that only a few respondents lack confidence in handling cultural misunderstandings. In summary, most participants believe they are capable of dealing with communication problems that may arise because of cultural differences, which shows a strong level of intercultural understanding and adaptability.

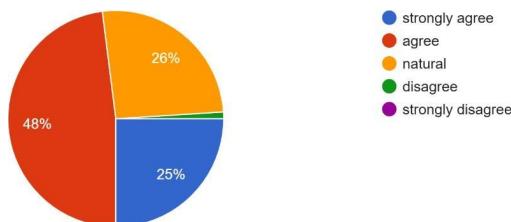


Figure 6. Misunderstandings arising from cultural differences.

4.4. Cultural Background Affects Interaction with Others

As shown in **Figure 7**, a large number of participants (49%) selected “Agree” (red), and 20% chose “Strongly Agree” (blue). Together, this shows that 69% of the respondents are aware that their cultural background influences the way they communicate with others. 27% responded “Neutral” (orange), meaning they are unsure or haven’t given much thought to this idea. A small portion selected “Disagree” (green) and “Strongly Disagree” (purple), making up only 4% in total. In brief, most participants recognize that their culture shapes how they behave and communicate, which is an important part of developing intercultural communication skills.

4.5. Knowledge about Culture and Communication Styles

The figure below (**Figure 8**) shows that almost half of the respondents (48%) agreed (red), while 16% strongly

agreed (blue). This shows that 64% of participants believe they have at least some basic understandings of other cultures and how people from those cultures communicate. About 32% chose neutral (orange), meaning they are unsure or don’t have strong opinions on this topic. A small number (4%) disagreed (green), and no participants selected “Strongly Disagree.” In summary, the majority of participants feel they have a basic awareness of other cultures and their communication styles, which is a positive sign for developing intercultural communication competence.

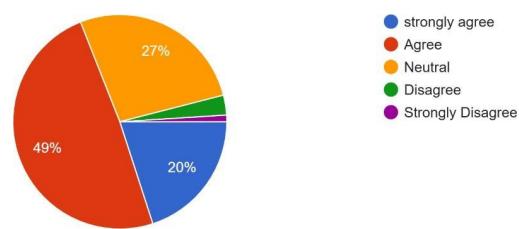


Figure 7. Cultural background affects interaction with others.

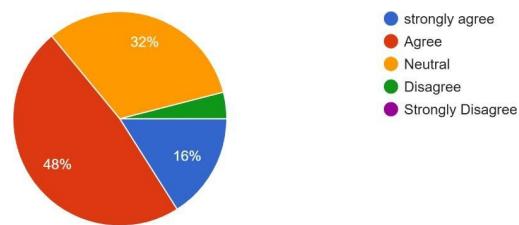


Figure 8. Knowledge about culture and communication styles.

4.6. Team Effectiveness

The following figure (**Figure 9**) shows that most participants (44%) agreed (red), and another 16% strongly agreed (blue). Together, 60% of the respondents feel confident about understanding and defining goals and roles when working in diverse teams. About 33% chose neutral (orange), meaning they are unsure or do not have a strong opinion. A small group (6%) disagreed (green), and only 1% strongly disagreed (purple). Overall, the majority of participants believe they have good team effectiveness skills in diverse groups, although a notable portion remains unsure.

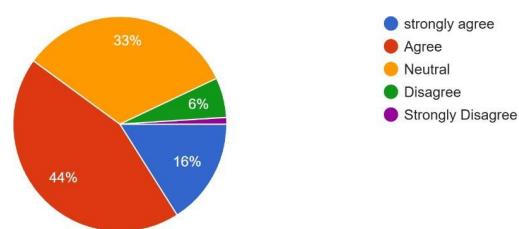


Figure 9. Understanding goals and roles in a diverse group.

4.7. Respect toward Team Members Regardless of Cultural Background

As shown in **Figure 10**, the largest group, 37%, strongly agreed (blue), while 35% agreed (red). This means that 72% of the participants believe they respect all team members, no matter where they come from. Another 25% selected neutral (orange), showing they are unsure or do not have a clear opinion. Only a small number, about 2% (green and purple), disagreed or strongly disagreed. Overall, the majority of participants think they are respectful toward others in diverse teams, which is an important part of working well with people from different backgrounds.

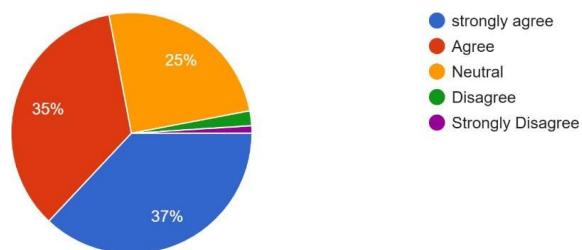


Figure 10. Respect toward team members regardless of cultural background.

4.8. Working Cooperatively with People from Different Cultures

Figure 11 investigates the participants' responses to cooperation with people from different cultural backgrounds. The largest portion, 36%, chose neutral (orange), meaning they are unsure or have no strong opinion about their ability. About 33% agreed (green), showing that one-third of participants feel confident working with diverse groups. Smaller portions include 15% who disagreed (red) and 10% who strongly disagreed (blue), showing that some participants feel they struggle in this area. Only 6% strongly agreed (purple), which is the smallest group. Overall, while some participants feel positive about working with people from other cultures, a large number remain uncertain, and a noticeable group feels they lack this skill, highlighting an area that could be strengthened through practice or training.

4.9. Patience in Unfamiliar Cultural Communication

Figure 12 shows the participants' responses to remaining patient when communicating with individuals whose

cultural norms are unfamiliar to them. Almost half of the participants (46%) agreed (red), showing they believe they stay patient in these situations. Another 26% strongly agreed (blue), bringing the total to 72% who feel confident about their patience. About 22% were neutral (orange), meaning they are unsure or have no strong opinion. Only 4% combined disagreed (green) or strongly disagreed (purple), which is a very small portion. Overall, most participants think they can handle cultural uncertainty with patience, an important skill for smooth intercultural communication.

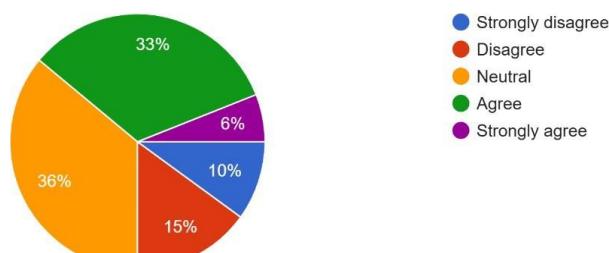


Figure 11. Ability to work cooperatively with people from different cultures.

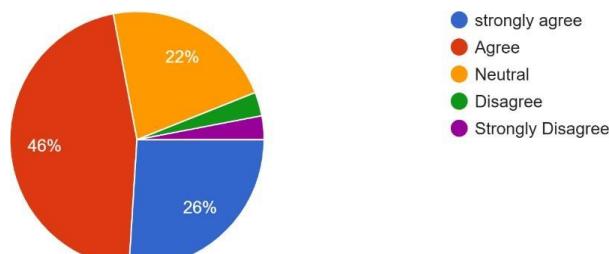


Figure 12. Patience in unfamiliar cultural communication.

4.10. Tolerance of Ambiguity and Uncertainty from Cultural Differences

Figure 13 shows the participants' response to "tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty from cultural differences." 46% agreed (red), showing that nearly half feel they can handle uncertain situations caused by cultural differences. Another 17% strongly agreed (blue), making a total of 63% who feel positive about this skill. 29% of respondents chose neutral (orange), meaning they are unsure about their ability to handle such situations. A smaller group, 7%, disagreed (green), and 1% strongly disagreed (purple), showing only a few participants struggled with tolerating ambiguity. Overall, most participants believe they can cope with unclear or uncertain situations when dealing with cultural differences, though a notable portion remains unsure.

4.11. Openness toward Unfamiliar Cultural Practices

The following figure (Figure 14) shows the participants' responses to their openness toward unfamiliar cultural practices. 39% agreed (red), and 19% strongly agreed (blue), meaning 58% of participants feel they are open-minded when encountering cultural practices they are not familiar with. About 30% chose neutral (orange), showing they are unsure or do not have a strong opinion. A smaller group, 12%, disagreed (green), while no participants selected strongly disagree. Overall, most participants show openness toward new cultural experiences, though some remain uncertain, and a few feel less comfortable in these situations.

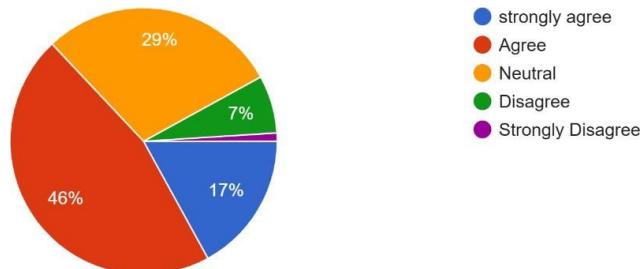


Figure 13. Tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty from cultural differences.

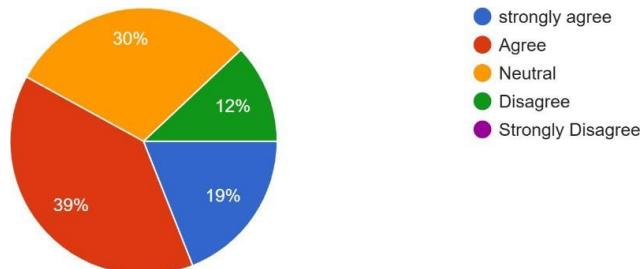


Figure 14. Openness toward unfamiliar cultural practices.

4.12. Willingness to Accept Cultural Risks and Changes

Figure 15 shows the participants' responses to their willingness to accept cultural risks and changes. 40% chose neutral (orange), meaning many participants are unsure or do not have a strong opinion about this. About 27% agreed (red), and 16% strongly agreed (blue), meaning a total of 43% feel positive and open to accepting cultural risks and changes. A smaller group, 15%, disagreed (green), and only 2% strongly disagreed (purple). Overall, while some participants are open to cultural risks, a large portion remains uncertain, suggest-

ing this is an area where more confidence or experience could be developed. This construct reflects readiness to engage with unfamiliar cultural norms or practices. For instance, students may join English-medium discussions, work with culturally diverse peers, or try new teaching and learning methods.

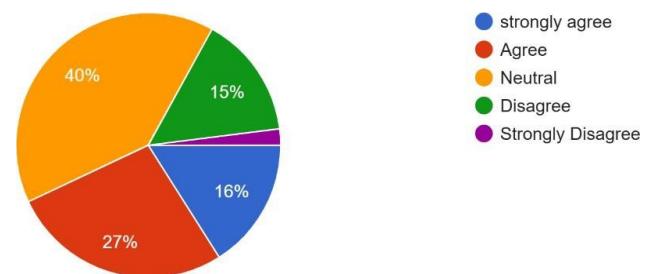


Figure 15. Willingness to accept cultural risks and changes.

4.13. Flexibility in Unfamiliar Cultural Settings

Figure 16 shows the participants' responses to their flexibility in unfamiliar cultural settings. 37% agreed (red), showing that over one-third of participants feel they can adjust well in new cultural situations. Another 15% strongly agreed (blue), making a total of 52% who feel confident in their flexibility. About 26% chose neutral (orange), indicating they are unsure or have no strong opinion. A smaller portion, 20%, disagreed (green), and only 2% strongly disagreed (purple). Overall, while most participants believe they are flexible in unfamiliar situations in cultural settings, a notable number are unsure or feel less confident, suggesting room for growth in adaptability skills.

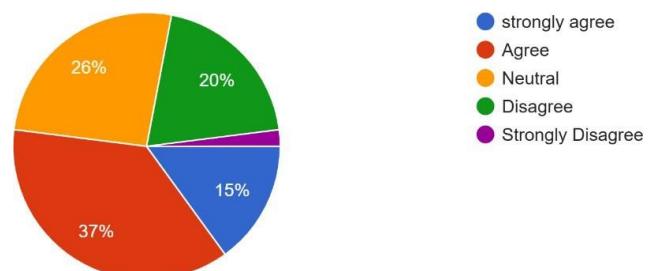


Figure 16. Flexibility in unfamiliar cultural settings.

4.14. Handling Communications Challenges Due to Cultural Differences

When participants were asked whether they faced communication challenges due to cultural differences and how they handled such issues, several participants shared mean-

ingful examples. For instance, one respondent described communicating with someone from China and learning to adjust by speaking more politely and listening carefully, showing that respect and patience were key strategies. Another respondent explained facing challenges with an American professor who was very direct; they adapted by focusing on the message rather than the delivery, which helped improve their confidence and clarity. Similarly, a conversation with an American student led another participant to manage discomfort by changing the subject to something more neutral and everyday, showing flexibility in conversation topics.

On the other hand, many participants simply answered “no” or “not,” indicating they had not yet faced cultural communication challenges or did not recall such experiences. A few responses were vague or unclear (such as “how” or “ok”), which suggests that some questionnaire items included illustrative prompts to guide participants’ responses, though not all questions contained explicit examples. This may account for occasional minimal responses such as “how” or “ok,” suggesting that some participants either did not fully engage with the question or found it challenging to interpret without further context.

Overall, among those who reported experiences, the most effective approaches included adapting communication style, being respectful, listening actively, and learning from the other culture’s norms. These findings highlight the importance of intercultural awareness and flexibility when dealing with diverse communication situations.

4.15. Important Qualities/Skills for Effective Communication in a Multicultural Environment

When the participants were asked about important qualities/skills for effective communication in a multicultural environment, many participants emphasized respect as a key foundation, with repeated mentions of the need to respect others’ ideas, cultures, and ways of thinking. Patience was also highlighted often, showing that participants understand the importance of staying calm and open when dealing with people from different backgrounds. Another common theme was listening skills, particularly “active listening” and “listening between the lines,” which help avoid misunderstandings and show genuine interest in others.

Several participants also mentioned adaptability and

flexibility, meaning the ability to adjust one’s communication style depending on the situation and the cultural context.

Other qualities brought up include empathy, cultural awareness, open-mindedness, and tolerance for ambiguity, all pointing to the importance of understanding both the emotions and cultural perspectives of others. A few respondents also mentioned language skills, self-confidence, and knowledge as helpful in improving communication. Overall, the responses show that participants recognize a combination of interpersonal skills (like respect and empathy) and practical communication strategies (like listening, asking questions, and adapting) as essential for success in multicultural settings. While some responses were vague or unclear, the majority reflected thoughtful insights on what helps build effective intercultural connections.

5. Discussion

Developing cultural competence is crucial for effective communication and collaboration in diverse academic settings. Students and faculty can enhance these skills through exposure to multicultural experiences, reflective practice, and guided interaction with culturally diverse peers. Hernández-López’s^[18] Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity provides a useful framework, describing a progression from ethnocentric stages, where one’s own culture is viewed as central, toward ethnorelative stages, where cultural differences are recognized, respected, and integrated into interactions. Structured activities such as cross-cultural workshops, collaborative projects, and language immersion can help facilitate this development, enabling participants to engage more confidently and effectively in multicultural academic environments.

The findings of this study reveal important insights into the intercultural communication competence (ICC) of students at the University of Halabja. The demographic profile, dominated by participants in their early twenties, aligns with recent studies showing that younger university learners tend to display higher intercultural openness and adaptability due to increased exposure to global media and digital intercultural interactions^[7,18]. The balanced gender distribution further supports the representativeness of the sample, as research indicates that gender differences in ICC have become less pronounced in recent years^[13].

A major finding is the strong agreement among participants that cultural differences shape communication styles. This aligns with contemporary empirical work demonstrating that university students increasingly acknowledge the role of culture in shaping communication patterns, even in relatively homogeneous cultural regions^[2,10,19]. Students' recognition of communication variations suggests an emerging intercultural sensitivity, which is considered a foundational component of ICC in modern frameworks^[8].

Participants also reported high confidence in handling misunderstandings arising from cultural differences. Similar findings have been reported in recent studies where students describe growing comfort in navigating intercultural challenges, largely due to increased access to globalized online environments and multilingual education^[12,20,21]. However, the substantial proportion of neutral responses suggests that not all learners have experienced authentic intercultural interactions: This reflects a challenge commonly cited in current ICC literature: students may possess positive attitudes but lack real intercultural engagement opportunities, particularly in non-internationalized institutions^[15].

The findings also show that a majority of students believe they possess basic knowledge about cultural practices and communication styles. This is consistent with recent scholarship that highlights how global exposure, online platforms, and intercultural coursework contribute to increased cultural awareness among young adults^[1,22]. Still, the high number of neutral responses indicates variation in the depth of cultural knowledge. Several studies emphasize that knowledge alone is insufficient unless paired with active intercultural practice and reflection^[14,23].

The results related to teamwork reveal that students demonstrate strong respect for team members from diverse cultural backgrounds but moderate confidence in cooperation and role clarity within multicultural teams. Respect toward diversity is one of the strongest predictors of successful teamwork in recent multicultural education studies^[24,25]. However, uncertainty in collaboration skills suggests the need for structured intercultural group assignments, which have been found to enhance communication, trust, and performance in diverse student teams^[16].

Other ICC dimensions—such as patience, tolerance of ambiguity, openness, and flexibility—received high agreement levels. These findings align with modern interpreta-

tions of ICC, highlighting emotional resilience and cognitive flexibility as essential components for intercultural adaptation^[19]. Recent studies also emphasize that openness and tolerance of ambiguity strongly predict intercultural willingness, identity development, and readiness for global citizenship^[3,26,27]. However, the persistent presence of neutral responses suggests that while attitudes are positive, many students may still be navigating uncertainty or lack real-world intercultural practice, a pattern commonly reported in post-pandemic studies of intercultural learning^[12].

The findings regarding willingness to accept cultural risks and flexibility in unfamiliar cultural settings indicate mixed levels of readiness. While over half of the participants expressed openness or adaptability, a notable minority expressed hesitation. Research from 2019–2024 shows that students from more culturally stable or homogeneous regions often demonstrate limited risk-taking in intercultural contexts due to unfamiliarity, limited exposure, or perceived threats to identity^[24,25,28]. This underscores the importance of institutional initiatives that promote safe, guided intercultural encounters—both virtual and face-to-face.

Overall, the results demonstrate that students at the University of Halabja possess several strong attitudinal foundations for ICC—such as openness, respect, patience, and awareness—consistent with global trends among young adult learners. However, the widespread neutrality across several indicators highlights the need for increased experiential opportunities, structured intercultural teamwork, and culturally enriched curriculum design. Contemporary ICC scholarship emphasizes that the most effective way to strengthen intercultural competence is through intentional, reflective, and sustained exposure to cultural difference^[9,11]. Therefore, to fully develop ICC, the University of Halabja may consider adopting approaches such as virtual exchange programs, international collaboration projects, multilingual education, and in-class cultural simulations.

6. Conclusions

The investigation into cross-cultural communication competence at the University of Halabja reveals a campus that is aware of cultural diversity, yet learning how to translate awareness into effective practice. Survey results showed strong agreement that culture influences communication,

and that respect for team members from every background is important. Most participants also reported patience when encountering unfamiliar norms, demonstrating a positive attitudinal base for intercultural growth. Nevertheless, noticeable neutrality and occasional disagreement appeared in items linked to active cooperation, willingness to accept cultural risks, and flexibility in unknown settings. These hesitations suggest that knowledge and attitudes have not fully matured into confident behaviors. The narrative answers reinforced this picture: while several students described successful adaptations, many could not recall a single intercultural challenge, hinting at limited exposure or reflective thinking. As a result, the university community currently sits at an intermediate stage of CCC development, possessing awareness and goodwill, but lacking consistent experiential competence.

These findings have practical implications. Without support—which may include cross-cultural workshops, language assistance programs, inclusive teaching practices, peer mentoring, and reflective activities—misinterpretations may arise, potentially undermining group projects, classroom debates, and social cohesion. Conversely, targeted interventions could elevate competence, given the existing positive attitudes. The study underscores the value of structured opportunities that move individuals from recognizing difference to engaging with it positively. By providing data from a Kurdish higher-education context, the research broadens the geographic coverage of CCC studies and offers a benchmark for other regional universities facing similar demographic changes. Continued monitoring will be essential to measure progress and refine support mechanisms over time.

Recommendations

To strengthen cross-cultural communication competence at the University of Halabja, a multi-layered action plan should be adopted:

Embed compulsory intercultural communication modules within language and general education courses. Lessons should combine theory with role-plays that mirror common campus situations, allowing students to practice respectful dialogue and active listening in a safe setting.

Organize facilitated cultural exchange circles regularly. In these small groups, students from different majors and backgrounds can share traditions, discuss study habits, and

jointly solve tasks, gradually building empathy and cooperation skills.

Introduce experiential workshops for lecturers and administrative staff. Training should address cultural bias, inclusive activities, and conflict mediation. When faculty model effective behavior, students are more likely to follow.

Create a peer-mentoring scheme that pairs first-year students with senior peers who have demonstrated high CCC. Mentors can guide newcomers through practical challenges such as group projects or community events, providing realistic examples of adaptability.

Establish an annual “Intercultural Week” featuring panels, food fairs, and storytelling evenings. Such visible celebrations validate every culture present on campus and reduce anxiety about differences.

Monitor progress through yearly surveys using the same questionnaire from this study, complemented by focus groups. Data should inform continuous improvement, ensuring efforts remain responsive to student needs. This phased programme requires cooperation among university leadership, the language centre, and student unions, with moderate costs and substantial benefits. Over time, these initiatives enhance academic performance and social cohesion while also preparing students for multicultural workplaces and promoting personal growth through empathy, adaptability, and intercultural understanding. Existing goodwill should be transformed into confident skills, supporting academic excellence and social harmony across the university community.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization and study design: H.M.A. and Z.N.G.; Data collection and questionnaire administration: A.A., S.J. and H.K.; Data analysis and interpretation: Z.N.G. and H.M.A.; Drafting of the manuscript: Z.N.G.; Critical revision and intellectual content review: All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study involved human participants and was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. Participation was voluntary, and anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained. No personal identifying information was collected.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical and institutional restrictions related to participant confidentiality. However, anonymized data may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request for academic purposes.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

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