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Teaching competencies for teaching English and French in a virtual modality

Competencias docentes para la enseñanza del Inglés y Francés en modalidad virtual

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Abstract

The importance of this study lies in identifying what competencies the teachers of the Faculty of Languages developed in the virtual modality from the transition from face-to-face to virtual practice. For this purpose, a quantitative study with a descriptive scope and longitudinal section to identify the underlying competencies in teachers in the virtual modality took place. To obtain the data, students enrolled in the two undergraduate programs (English and French) during the spring and autumn periods in 2020 did evaluations. The results of this study show the identification of competencies present in the virtual classes during the contingency stage, namely: academic-pedagogical competence (9.30), technical-digital competence (9.32), and socio-affective competence (9.42) with a satisfactory average according to the measurement scale used. In conclusion, teachers developed more socio-affective competencies by showing greater empathy during virtual classes, establishing a relationship of understanding and respect to generating interest or motivation to learn under this modality, leaving in a second plane, the planning, design, or adaptation of content to a techno-pedagogical model mediated by the use of learning and knowledge technologies.

Teaching competencies, Virtual modality, Teaching-learning process

Resumen

La importancia de este estudio radica en identificar qué competencias desarrollaron los docentes de la Facultad de Lenguas en la modalidad virtual a partir de la transición de la práctica presencial a la virtual. Para tal fin, se llevó a cabo un estudio cuantitativo con alcance descriptivo y corte longitudinal, con el propósito de identificar las competencias subyacentes en los docentes en la modalidad virtual. Se tomó como base los datos de las evaluaciones realizadas por los alumnos inscritos en los dos programas de licenciatura (inglés y francés) en el periodo de primavera y otoño 2020. Los resultados de este estudio muestran la identificación de competencias presentes en las clases virtuales durante la etapa de contingencia, a saber: competencia académico-pedagógica (9.30), competencia técnica-digital (9.32) y competencia socio-afectiva (9.42) con un promedio de satisfactorio según la escala de medición empleada. En conclusión, los docentes desarrollaron más las competencias socio-afectivas al mostrar una mayor empatía durante las clases virtuales, entablando una relación de comprensión y respeto para generar interés o motivación por aprender bajo esta modalidad, dejando en segundo plano la planeación, diseño o adaptación de contenidos a un modelo tecno-pedagógico mediado por el uso de las tecnologías del aprendizaje y conocimiento.

Competencias docentes, Modalidad virtual, Proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje

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Introduction

The current educational context in Mexico, derived from COVID-19, required the transition from face-to-face higher education to virtual education, incorporating Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and Learning and Knowledge Technologies (LKT) in teaching (CEPAL-UNESCO, 2020). As a result of this migration, Higher Education teachers had to test their knowledge, skills, abilities, and capacities by adapting and generating didactic competencies to respond to the needs of emerging virtual teaching.

This research focuses on the issue of teaching a foreign language such as English and French in the new educational context. The importance of the study lies in the identification of the teaching competencies developed in virtual mode during the pandemic (Inciarte, 2008). The hypothesis of this study is as follows: the satisfactory performance of the teachers from two-degree programmes of the Faculty of Languages at BUAP shows the development of the necessary competencies for the virtual modality. To this end, the methodology employed is quantitative with a descriptive and longitudinal scope (Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2014).

The structure of the study includes the presentation of the theoretical framework to support the research, the applied methodology, data collection instrument, analysis model, and results to frame the underlying conclusions of the study phenomenon.

Theoretical framework

During the 1990s, virtual education, known as online professional courses, distance educational, or virtual training, gained prominence (Yong et al., 2017; Jardines, 2009). With the expansion of communication networks and digital tools, the world of technology began to advance at a dizzying pace to such an extent that the Internet represented access to the digital world (Gros, 2018).

Within the Education System in Mexico, foreign language education and training benefited from access to information and professionalisation through e-learning (Mangenot, 2017), defined by the European Union (Unión Europea, 2001) as the use of multimedia resources to enhance learning through easy access to tools, resources, services, exchanges and collaborations in virtual environments.

Based on the above, a virtual course, education, and training require the adaptation, creation, generation, and development of competencies that enable a meaningful virtual learning and teaching process.

In this sense, some studies provide their vision of what competencies teachers should have for such a virtual education. In this regard, Smith, and Simpson (1995) identify seven digital competencies in university teachers required for effective teaching in virtual environments. Likewise, Amaya et al. (2021) contribute with an analysis of virtual teaching competencies in university classes, concluding that these are not reduced to the simple application of a specific platform but rather to the integral optimisation of teaching and learning processes with technology. In such a way, an evaluative model of technological knowledge is necessary to identify them (Domínguez et al., 2014). The previous studies emphasise the priority of identifying and delimiting the academic, affective, and technological competencies of teachers to face e-learning.

Competencies

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), one of the main competencies of every citizen in the 21st century is the digital one (OCDE, 2015), which means that the use of technology is essential in both the educational and professional spheres. Moreover, the European Commission (EC) broadens the sense of the importance of digital competencies by conceptualising them as central for the information society. Likewise, in Education for Global Citizenship, UNESCO stresses the need for digital competencies, ensuring that they facilitate universal access to education and enable the development of teachers (UNESCO, 2016).

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In the current context, those competencies refer to virtual education where teachers test their digital knowledge and skills to achieve didactic, pedagogical, and institutional objectives. Studies by Barragán et al. (2013) argue that some areas or circumstances give rise to new digital teaching competencies needed to design innovative teaching strategies that break traditional paradigms. These areas are generally technological development, pedagogical and social changes. Hence, repeatedly, in the face of disruptive changes, teachers develop different competencies to meet learning needs.

In 2017, the Horizon Report on Higher Education (NMC, 2017) referred to the concept of digital competencies in education as the application of technology and the collaboration and promotion of technologies in the fast-paced digital world supported by virtual teaching models such as m-learning, b-learning, e-learning, among others.

In this sense, in virtual education, the teacher develops a methodology in the teaching-learning processes, and in turn, decides the role to be played by those technologies through diagnosing, treating, and evaluating what is a must for effective teaching practice.

Thus, a series of capacities must be available under innovative needs (Aramburuzabala et al., 2013), complemented by abilities for new technologies, interdisciplinarity, and teaching innovation (Amador et al., 2017). In the words of Tejada and Navío (2005), the use of technologies in e-learning requires digital teaching competencies that guarantee knowledge and know-how in and with ICT.

According to Krumsvik (2011), digital teaching competencies demand the ICT application in professional environments based on pedagogical criteria. They also include knowledge, attitudes, and strategies that the teacher will activate and manage in didactic and pedagogical situations to facilitate learning and innovate the educational process (Carrera and Coiduras, 2012).

One of the explanatory models of digital competencies is the one presented by Koehler et al. (2015) called T-PACK, whose main contribution lies in a theoretical framework for technologies used in teaching with some features like organisation, planning, and design (Papanikolaou, Makri & Roussos, 2017) of technology-mediated activities. Thus, the model aims to develop underlying digital competencies in teachers such as technological, pedagogical, and disciplinary knowledge (Castillo, King, & Ruíz, 2021) that enable formal education with technology in a situated manner, incorporating the means and resources for effective teaching (González, 2017).

In addition to the digital abilities linked to the teaching function in e-learning, academic-pedagogical competencies are aligned and characterised by the planning, selection, and evaluation of the teaching-learning process to select and organise the disciplinary content for the achievement of academic and learning objectives (Smith and Simpson, 1995; Zabalza, 2008; Torra et al., 2012; Mas, 2012).

Furthermore, according to some authors, the significance of such competencies gives projection to learning (Sevillano, 2009; Leví and Ramos, 2013), and they complement the virtual education field.

The socio-affective competencies in teaching practice mean being empathetic in the face of changes or conflicts within the didactic action. Indeed, the close relationship between the emotional and social competencies influences teachers to create a warm atmosphere in their class, solve problems in the classroom, and communicate respectfully synchronously or asynchronously. At the same time, being emotionally competent allows teachers the following: to be aware of their ability to teach at different educational levels, to generate self-esteem with objectivity, and to be tolerant towards students' frustration (López- Cassá, 2005). Therefore, getting social and affective competencies makes them more empathetic for coexistence and promotes the development of collaborative work in any teaching modality (Pertegal-Felices et al., 2011).

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Methodology

This study is quantitative with a descriptive scope and aims to characterise the teaching competencies developed in the virtual learning modality by measuring the teaching performance with data collection from the spring and autumn 2020 school period (Bisquerra, 2004).

The sample consists of 4225 students' evaluations in which 106 teachers represent the total English and French teaching population of the Faculty of Languages from the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla during the spring and autumn periods.

The data collection technique to know the degree of satisfaction was an online survey that measures teaching performance through a Likert-type questionnaire with ordinal values (Fabila et al., 2012) ranging from 5 to 10. Although the study was longitudinal because the same instrument took place at the end of the spring and autumn periods with different subjects and students, the results only reflect a general average for competencies, as the purpose was not to compare them in both periods.

The instrument includes nine attributes or indicators to frame the competencies teachers should develop in the virtual modality (Koehler et al. 2015; Pertegal-Felices et al., 2011; Torra et al., 2012; Mas, 2012), which are listed as follows:

1. Actions and interventions implemented by the teacher to facilitate learning.
2. Overall course planning and organisation.
3. Adherence to assessment criteria.
4. Use of digital didactic material to promote autonomous work.
5. Use of virtual communication channels for academic counselling.
6. Use of digital tools and platforms for the delivery of courses.
7. Encourage friendly and respectful interaction in the group.
8. Promote participation.
9. Show empathy to the conditions of the study.

A descriptive statistical analysis took place using the SPSS software to identify teaching competencies through the teaching performance and generate an analysis model for data interpretation.

Attributes	Measure:
1. Actions and interventions implemented by the teacher to facilitate learning	Academic and pedagogical competencies
2. Overall course planning and organisation	
3. Adherence to the evaluation criteria	
1. Use of digital learning materials to promote autonomous work	Digital-technical competencies
2. Use of virtual communication channels for academic advising	
3. Use of digital tools and platforms for course delivery	
1. Encourage friendly and respectful interaction in the group.	Socio-affective competencies
2. Promote participation	
3. Show empathy to the conditions of the study.	

Table 1 Structure of the evaluation questionnaire based on Koehler et al. (2015), Pertegal- Felices et al. (2011), Torra et al. (2012), and Mas (2012)

Results

The following tables show the features and overall averages for the three competencies.

Attributes of academic-pedagogical competencies	Overall average
Actions and interventions implemented by the teacher to facilitate learning	9.20
Overall course planning and organisation	9.25
Adherence to the evaluation criteria	9.45
Average	**9.30**

Table 2 Academic-pedagogical competencias

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In the table above, teachers register the lowest average, which implies that their classes need the application of ICT to embed their contents in virtual formats and adapt those contents, processes, and activities to virtual environments (Amaro, 2011). These also match with the studies carried out by Amaya et al. (2021) in affirming that the concordance between the notion of planning and implementation of thematic contents and the characteristics of the virtual modality is central.

Moreover, findings indicate that teachers did not carry out 100% didactic adjustment to virtual modality since they did not analyse the subject matter for a possible activation or adaptation of the instructional materials to the alternative technological media to achieve an appropriate organisation, planning, intervention, and evaluation to a virtual techno- pedagogical design (Flores-González, 2020).

Although the evaluation trend registers the highest average (9.45), there is a latent weakness in the adequacy of the evaluation criteria and activities for the learning process, which obstructs a clear understanding of how the instructional and learning process can be modified when technology is aligned pedagogically. From the above, there is a certain lack of appropriate use of the technological and pedagogical means and resources involved in a didactic design focused on virtual teaching.

In summary, teachers need to develop these competencies as they reflect the lowest average (9.30) of the three underlying competencies during the confinement stage.

Attributes of technical-digital competencies	Overall average
Using digital learning materials to promote autonomous work	9.20
Use of virtual communication channels for academic advising	9.40
Use of digital tools and platforms for course delivery	9.38
Average	**9.32**

Table 3 Digital-technical competencias

The table shows that language teachers develop communicative, receptive, and counselling competencies through the use of media with various formats, tools, and digital platforms that allow them to identify learning difficulties generated during virtual classes and outside the sessions, through synchronous or asynchronous virtual academic counselling (Rincón, 2008).

It is worth mentioning that the dimension of digital didactic material to promote autonomous work registers the lowest average (9.20) of the three dimensions. It means that teachers did not fully develop, or to a very satisfactory degree, their competencies to design, adapt or readapt materials to the virtual modality and therefore did not use ICT as learning and knowledge technologies but rather a means to carry out their teaching-learning process as shown in the second and third dimensions with an average of 9.40 and 9.38 respectively.

It also presupposes that their techno-pedagogical design requires the implementation of activities, resources, and materials to develop autonomous learning with didactic mediation strategies (Sierra-Varón, 2011).

Attributes of socio-emotional competencies	Overall average
Encourage friendly and respectful interaction in the group.	9.49
Promoting participation	9.37
Show empathy to the conditions of study	9.40
Average	**9.42**

Table 4 Socio-emotional competencies

The socio-affective competencies (9.42) include interaction, participation, and empathy to favour the development of meaningful learning experiences in a virtual environment and manage assertive communication that fosters exchanges with positive attitudes and respect (Briones et al., 2020) since the lack of face-to-face contact could occasionally generate communication and attitude appreciation problems (Morales and Curiel, 2019).

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Moreover, participation (9.37) is more restricted in virtual environments because the teaching process demands academic assessment (Rincón, 2008). However, with the help of synchronous platforms, this appreciation could change. Thus, teachers must develop strategies that promote inter-group and interpersonal participation in academic tasks (Vásquez and Arango, 2012).

Finally, concerning empathy (9.40), it is essential to highlight that teachers managed to establish a relationship of understanding and respect with students to generate interest or motivation to learn (Rossado, 2016).

Discussions

The transition from traditional education to virtual environments requires adapting didactic and pedagogical action, developing relevant competencies to respond to the new educational challenges. That is why the innovation of this study lies in the three teaching competencies that encompass the teacher's tasks in virtual environments for the area of foreign language teaching, expanding the value and generation of new professional strategies in different teaching contexts.

The quantitative methodology with a descriptive scope made it possible to obtain, analyse and characterise the results of the teaching evaluations accomplished by the students (Villarroel and Bruna, 2017), expressing the attributes that frame the three defined competencies.

The competencies identified in different subjects of the two educational programmes were:

- The academic-pedagogical competencies allude to situational planning, flexible learning contents, individual and collaborative learning (Garduño, 2009), evaluative and teaching strategies for generating meaningfulness and autonomy (Vila, 2010).
- The technical-digital competencies. Here, the most outstanding components were digital didactic material for the promotion of flexible, interactive, and adaptive autonomous work (Torres and García, 2019), virtual communication media, tools for cohesion and effective interaction between the members of a learning group (Pérez, 2009), and platforms for the development of autonomous learning (Domínguez et al., 2014), a fundamental characteristic of this modality.
- Socio-affective competencies characterised by friendly interaction, respectful participation, and empathy towards the conditions of study, expressed in suitable communicative actions towards students (Parra et al., 2006).

According to the averages in the competencies developed by the teachers during the online classes, the socio-affective is present in most of the teachers, leading to figuring out there is a willingness to help students in learning. It also presupposes a closeness of understanding for difficulties and limitations in a virtual classroom (Rebollo et al., 2008).

The above contrasts with the average in the technical-digital competencies, allowing us to deduce that teachers were limited in their use as a resource or means to communicate and present the activities, shortening the possibilities for the development of autonomous learning along with LKT.

In the same way, they prioritise the social understanding that the student presents in the current situation, postponing the opportunities offered by technology in virtual classes. At the pedagogical level, the planning weakly adapts to the virtual environment of the techno-pedagogical design.

As far as the contributions of the present study are concerned, these are methodological and theoretical.

The first contributes to the development of the model of analysis that encompasses the teaching tasks in general competencies to simplify the interpretation of the findings.

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The second focuses on the identification of the teaching competencies in the teaching and learning process of a foreign language in virtual modalities as well as the identification and characterisation of the current competencies that teachers developed during this confinement stage so that on this basis, the necessary competencies are in the techno-pedagogical design to get desirable outcomes.

As with any research project, there are limitations to the study. One of these is the modality, as studies like those of Domínguez et al. (2014) show more complex visions of teaching competencies in digital environments, including planning, communication, motivation, methodology, media integration, tutorials, assessment, research, institutional belonging, innovation, interculturality, and professional identity.

Another limitation is the contents, because if the focus is on a different educational level and native or second language, the competencies needed in the teaching-learning process may differ or be more necessary.

Moreover, future research derived from this study could be the impact of digital teaching competencies on academic performance, the generation of autonomy in virtual environments through the implementation of competencies, pedagogical innovation in the virtual classroom, synchronous and asynchronous digital courses through instructional design based on competences, among others.

Conclusions

The teaching tasks and activities adapted to virtual learning environments enabled the identification of competencies for the English and French teaching process as a foreign language at higher education level being academic-pedagogical, digital, technical, and socio-affective.

It is worth mentioning that the last one had the highest percentage. Thus, teachers demonstrated an empathetic attitude towards the feelings and conditions of the students, a scenario where they show affinity to work conditions, leaving in the background the adaptation of the contents, activities, and evaluations of the subject.

Even though the digital teaching materials and technological resources are a significant scaffolding for the construction of learning and autonomy, the results reveal they are not estimated.

In general, teachers develop skills, knowledge, and attitudes that help them provide an immediate response to a social need in emerging virtual learning environments, but there is still much to be done to develop such teaching competencies.

Finally, the satisfactory performance of the teachers from the two-degree programmes of the Faculty of Languages at BUAP confirms the hypothesis.

Nonetheless, they still need to work on the technical-digital and academic-pedagogical competencies, specifically in the planning and organisation of the course as well as in actions and interventions to facilitate not only learning but also the use of digital teaching material for autonomous work, digital tools, and platforms for course delivery.

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