

Aligned ICTs to the CEFR in the Cuban foreign language teaching program

Denis Raul Cardoso Rodríguez ^{1,*}

¹Foreign Languages Department, Teaching Faculty, Marta Abreu Central University of Las Villas, Santa Clara City and 50100, Cuba

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Abstract: This study examines integrating information and communication technologies (ICTs) into foreign language teacher preparation aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) standards at a Cuban university. A mixed methods approach combined surveys, interviews, assessments and observations to evaluate effects on trainees' communicative competence development, interpreting uneven gains across reading, writing, listening and speaking abilities. Questionnaire and assessment analysis evidenced perceived and actual progress towards CEFR alignment among fifth year versus first year students resulting from sustained ICT incorporation over their progression. However, variability disadvantages persisted in some competencies. Qualitative insights emphasized technology's enablement of contextualized practice and real-world application as instrumental for competence growth. Despite affirmative outcomes overall, optimizing consistency by motivation and engagement-focused implementations is recommended. Intensive, systematic ICT integration shows potential for helping future foreign language teachers attain key standards-based competencies. Findings inform initial teacher training advancement in Cuba and beyond.

Keywords: Competence, Technology, Integration, Standards.

1. Introduction

The integration of information and communication technologies (ICTs) into foreign language teacher preparation programs is essential for preparing pre-service teachers to meet the demands of the 21st-century classroom (Starkey, 2020). ICTs can provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to enhance their own language skills, develop their cultural awareness, improve their pedagogical skills, and increase their motivation (Andujar et al., 2020; Baran et al., 2019; Mumford & Dikilitaş, 2020; Nelson et al., 2019; Park & Son, 2022; Pozas & Letzel, 2023). Several factors influence the successful integration of ICTs into teacher education programs, including teacher educators' beliefs and attitudes, pre-service teachers' beliefs and attitudes, access to technology, and professional development opportunities (Baran et al., 2019; Nelson et al., 2019; Pozas & Letzel, 2023). By providing pre-service teachers with the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions to use ICTs effectively, teacher education programs can help to ensure that future foreign language teachers are equipped to provide their students with high-quality language learning experiences.

* Corresponding Author: dennisrcr97@gmail.com

Developing a robust communicative competence is essential across foreign language acquisition contexts in enabling meaningful discourse, intercultural awareness, professional opportunities, and academic achievement (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). Oral proficiency specifically constitutes a complex, multifaceted priority skill set requiring consolidated efforts given the challenges learners demonstrate in attaining fluency. As online and technology-enabled education rapidly transforms instructional environments globally, purposeful integration of ICTs provides enriched mechanisms to advance speaking abilities (Golonka et al., 2020). This integration constitutes the research impetus worldwide and in Cuban higher education currently to strengthen language teacher preparation for contemporary classroom demands.

Internationally, substantial evidence confirms that learners struggle significantly attaining oral proficiency benchmarks through traditional methods alone, hindering skills application in academic endeavors and globalized social domains (Derwing & Munro, 2005). Meanwhile virtual exchange platforms, speech analysis software, mobile apps and multimedia tools continue expanding the promise of ICTs in language development. Hence, targeted investigation into optimized configurations enabling meaningful communicative competence gains is vital (Chen, 2020). This urgency escalated amidst the pandemic's educational technology proliferation, with English oral fluency specifically requiring reinforcement (Grimshaw & Cardoso, 2021). Therefore, aligning initial teacher training to leverage technologies suitably becomes imperative.

In the Cuban context similarly, English learners have long demonstrated limited oral abilities constraining effective communicative competence and professional mobility in this crucial international language (Reyes Cruz & Medina Pérez, 2020). Recent years however have presented concentrated efforts in specialized ICT use prompted by globalization. Studies confirm positive influences from virtual exchanges, digital simulations, speech recognition software and related tools on speaking skills when applied purposefully (Castellanos Guzman & Sánchez Pérez, 2018). Hence Cuban higher education programs training future foreign language teachers significantly need to integrate technology-enabled methodologies preparing new educators for modern classrooms.

Investigating appropriate ICT applications for elevating communicative abilities aligns with international research priorities examining specialized software, virtual encounters, digitally-supported discourse and related promising interventions (Fritz & Sutter, 2021). Exploring configurations within pre-service language teacher preparation can strengthen training programs in responding to contemporary classroom realities amidst this educational transformation. The current study consequently holds value in addressing the problem situation through an exploratory methodology gauging ICT impacts on attainment, interpreting means for enhancing uneven skill development, and recommending optimal, intensive technology integration models guided by international competence frameworks. Findings stand to meaningfully inform initial teacher education advancement at UCLV and similar Cuban institutions towards producing foreign language graduates effectively prepared to utilize modern instructional technologies in advancing the crucial priority that is communicative competence.

“Marta Abreu” Central University of Las Villas (UCLV) plays a leading role in developing highly qualified teachers nationwide across disciplines including foreign languages. However, students of the Bachelor of Education in Foreign Languages, English with a second language, as a general rule, arrive at the third year of the degree with an insufficient level of communicative competence in English, which does not allow them to successfully study theoretical subjects' practices in English. Addressing this deficiency is thus imperative, with ICT (TIC in Spanish) integration

carrying immense potential to enhance capacities by enabling immersive rehearsal. This constitutes the intention behind present efforts assessing current competence levels and the impact of technology tools on advancement. Having established the previous reasons, the objective is to evaluate the communicative competence and Learning technologies implementation of future Foreign Language teachers in alignment with the Common European Framework of References (CEFR) at UCLV.

2. Methods

A predominantly qualitative methodology is followed since this is a descriptive research, non-experimental. It has a mixed approach with emphasis on quantitative. For this, different theoretical and empirical methods were used. Within the theoretical methods are:

Analytical-systemic: Through this research method the author was able to analyze the teaching and learning process of the English language in the first three years of the program at the Marta Abreu Central University of Las Villas.

Logical-historical: It allowed the author to study the development and evolution around the use of technologies in the teaching and learning process of the English language.

Inductive-deductive: This method was of a great significance while doing the research. The induction allowed reviewing the teaching-learning process of English with the implementation of TIC aligned to the CEFR so as to establish a broader idea of the study in particular. Deduction gives a more detailed impression, going through the general knowledge on the implementation of TIC in English lessons.

Systematic approach; Through this method the author was able to illustrate the central structure and the features of the implementation of TIC aligned to the CEFR, outline the correlation and logic among them and determine the structure of the object and the dynamic.

Meanwhile, from the empirical level:

Document analysis: This method was used to review the literature and define the theoretical-conceptual aspects in relation to new technological tools used in the teaching-learning process, the self-perception of students in the foreign language and the teachers' impressions. For this, a review of articles was carried out published in journals indexed in important databases.

Observation: Through this method it was possible to obtain information regarding teaching and learning of the English language in the foreign language teaching program at UCLV.

Interviews and pedagogical surveys: This method was applied to students and teachers to learn fundamental aspects about the use of ICT in the teaching-learning process of the English language in the foreign language teaching program at UCLV.

Pedagogical assessment: An English language assessment designed based on CEFR guidelines to assess proficiency in the first and the third year of the major to the students described in the context.

Indicators from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages are used, adapted to the context.

3. Discussion

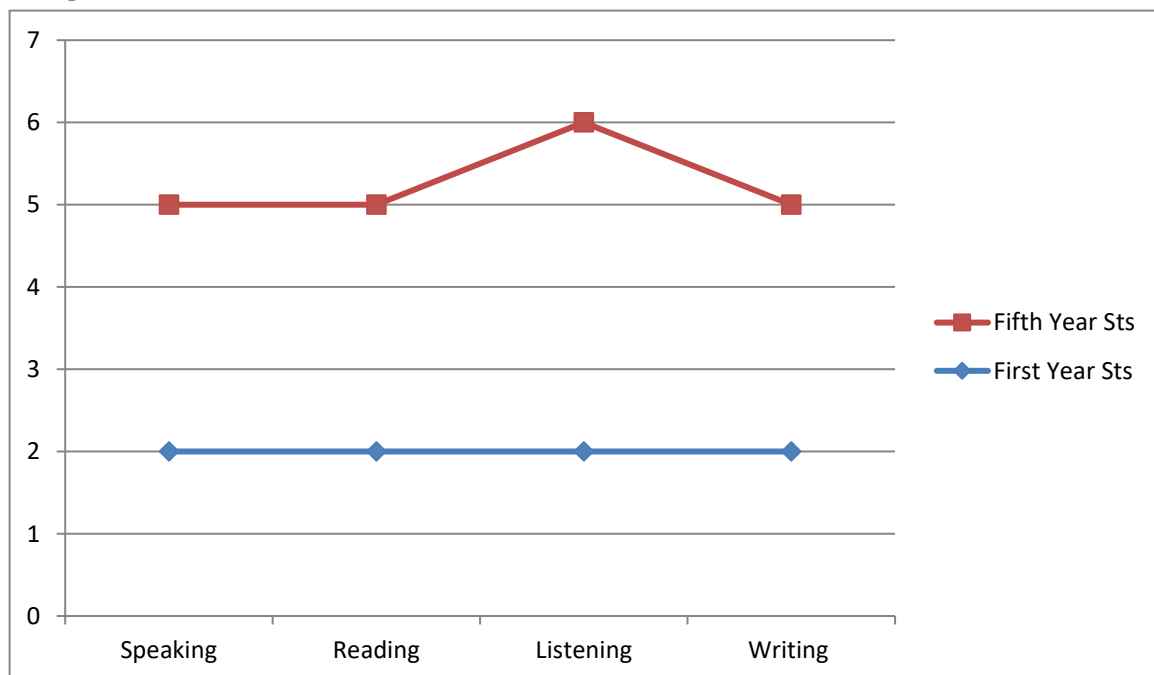
Once the starting theoretical framework is defined, the pertinent analyzes are carried out and the information obtained is triangulated.

Self-evaluative questionnaires aligned to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) established perceived communicative competence baselines from the outset (Council of Europe, 2020). Semi-structured interviews supplied more elaborate images of confidence progressing over time. Instructor accounts offered comparative observational insights between entry and later stage abilities following technology infusion. External language assessments verified competency demonstrations using CEFR benchmarks. Lastly, in-class checklist data revealed participation and engagement patterns potentially shaping learning processes.

Positive outcomes manifest along multiple dimensions. Questionnaires completed by fifth year students showed perceived skills predominantly spanning intermediate CEFR levels across writing, reading, listening and speaking - demonstrating progression from first year's reports of predominately basic usage (Alderson, 2005), as it is shown in Figure 1 where A1= 1, A2=2, B1=5, B2=6, C1=9, C2=10.

Figure 1

Self-perceived skills



Interview narratives reinforcing meaningful improvements particularly in writing fluency and incorporating online tools further upholds this trend (North, 2014). Likewise instructor perceptions cited technology as instrumental for the polished language abilities exhibited by third year trainees— namely through access to native speaker models.

Objectively, B1 level benchmark aligned assessments verified most participants' capacities in understanding straightforward texts, conveying arguments coherently in writing, grasping key details when listening, and discussing familiar topics conversationally (Papageorgi et al., 2015). Robust participation levels during observed English lessons equally signified engagement.

Checklist ratings also evidenced clear strengths in grammatical usage, interactive listening, spelling, and computer-based learning tool utilization amidst the majority.

Nevertheless, disadvantages marked by unevenness persist. Self-reports indicated lower confidence lingering in some areas over others – while seniors surpassed first years substantially overall. Listening lagged improvement trajectories according to student perceptions particularly. Such unreliable self-evaluation risks without triangulation pose limitations (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009).

Likewise, instructor accounts signaled initial restrictions often witnessed in newcomers' skills subsequently elevated through technological integration over their progression. However entry stage limitations may carry residuals even after training if early interventions prove insufficiently robust. Successfully consolidating motivation also represented an observable area still warranting attention for sub-groups of learners.

While the multifaceted assessments illuminated foreign language competence affirmatively, integrating ICTs earlier, frequently and effectively to target consistency across abilities remains imperative for optimizing teacher training outcomes (Richards, 2015). Ongoing motivation-enhancing implementations must couple this process to realize transformations.

The implemented instruments help accomplish the stated objectives around evaluating communicative competence and technology integration. The results indicate clear perceived differences between 1st and 5th year students, showcasing progression after sustained ICT incorporation. The varied tools provide a comprehensive evaluation per the described methodology.

4. Conclusions

1. The study indicates that first year foreign language teacher trainees have significant gaps in meeting communicative competence standards per the CEFR framework. However, fifth year students demonstrate substantive perceived and actual progress towards target proficiency levels over time resulting from systematic ICT integration.

2. Development is evidenced as uneven across reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. But assessments display adequate competencies benchmarked at B1 for most learners. Observations also confirm meaningful utilization of abilities by the majority, aligning with student self-perceptions in the A2 to B2 range by year 5.

3. Interviews and instructor input emphasize technology integration as crucial for growth by enabling contextualized practice, cultural immersion, and real-world interaction. Ongoing motivation and technology incorporation is recommended instructionally.

4. ICT-enhanced training shows promise for helping these future teaching professionals attain key communicative competencies required by international standards like the CEFR. Addressing variability and gaps by motivation/engagement leads to expertise development across areas.

Recommendation: The integration of ICT into pedagogical and evaluation activities in an intensive, systematic manner is recommended so that the positive impact on communicative competence can be evidenced. This aligns the initial training of future foreign language teachers with the international CEFR standards and curriculum internationalization.

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