
Investigating EFL Teachers' Perspectives on Competency-Based Language Learning

Khalil Motallebzadeh¹ and Razieh Ganjali^{2*}

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1. Department of English, Torbat-e-Heydareih Branch, Islamic Azad University, Torbat-e-Heydareih, Iran. Email: k.motaleb@iautorbat.ac.ir, kmotallebz@gmail.com
 2. Faculty Member, Sama Technical and Vocational Training College, Islamic Azad University, Mashhad Branch, Mashhad, Iran.
- * Corresponding Author's Email: r.ganjali@yahoo.com
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Abstract – This paper investigated teachers' perspectives on competency-based language learning with regard to various competencies, skills, knowledge, and expertise students should master to succeed in education and lifelong learning. Given the lack of standard definitions and consensus on a specific set of skills and competencies, it was decided to adopt as broad and comprehensive a definition, nomenclature and list of competencies as possible. To this end, they were chosen based on the conceptual framework described in whitepaper, a collaborative project by the American Association of colleges of teacher education and the Partnership for 21st century skills (2010), TUNING project's categorization of generic and specific competencies (2007), and Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001). In order to investigate teachers' viewpoints on learners' competencies as well as their subcategories, the researchers-made questionnaire was employed to 100 EFL teachers at different universities and English institutes in Mashhad, Iran. To come up with a tangible result, the collected data were analyzed through one sample T-test and Friedman Test. The analysis proved there is a positive and optimistic view and consensus among teachers on learners' competencies in total. However, information and technology competencies turned out to be more dominant as compared to other remaining competencies. The results of the study could be of benefit to teachers in improving their professional knowledge and become more cognizant of skills and competencies students should learn and master and accordingly do their best to boost their teaching performance and outcome.

Keywords: Information and technology competencies, learning and innovation competencies, life and career competencies.

1. INTRODUCTION

The principal changes in the economy, jobs, education, and businesses are driving new, various skills and competencies demands. Today more than ever, individuals must have the ability to carry out non-routine, creative tasks if they are to succeed. Whether a high school graduate plans to enter the workforce directly, or attend university or a vocational school, it is a requirement to be able to think critically, communicate, solve problems, collaborate, find good information quickly, adapt to change, and use technology effectively.

Accordingly, universities must accentuate the need to train the highly qualified students with competencies, knowledge, and skills that society requires for its development. In an increasingly globalized world, developing key competencies becomes paramount for teachers as well as students to be self-directed learners, manage goals and time, and participate actively in society. Hence, the ultimate aim of the competency-based model is thus to form flexible and adaptable professionals who can apply competencies to the varied, unforeseeable, and complex situations they will confront throughout their personal, social, and professional lives (Cano García, 2008; Pérez Gómez et al. 2009b) .

Traditionally, teaching and learning has been of great priority and importance in all educational settings. Moreover, it is an uncontested fact that we are currently being confronted with a “language challenge” (Tudor, 2008: 42) in our increasingly multilingual and multicultural society. Language education is in turmoil (Lorenzo, 2010) as a result of the new forces at work in our postmodern world: globalization, mobility, integration, and fusion (Coyle et al., 2010; Mehisto et al., 2008). Hence, teachers’ viewpoints on competencies, skills, and knowledge which students should master directly effect on their teaching. Consequently, it has turned into a highly effective issue for teachers, linguists and language specialists to investigate teachers’ perspectives on competency-based language learning as well as subcategories of competencies which is of course of great benefit and advantage to both teachers and learners.

Given the various definitions and nomenclature of competencies, the researchers tried to focus on the notion of competency presented by Cañado (2013) as ‘competency involves not only knowledge, but also skills, attitudes, and values, and entails the capacity to perform successfully in an academic, professional, or social environment’.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As higher education plays a crucial role in preparing students for the global workforce, a more holistic type of learning is favored (Blanco, 2009) , where theory and practice are not disconnected and where there is coherence between the students’ academic and professional profiles. The purpose is no longer for students to be mere content-specialists in their respective areas of study, but for them to utilize a set of abilities, skills, and attitudes which will allow them to succeed in their chosen professions (De Miguel Díaz, 2006; Rodríguez Esteban, 2007).

According to Kay and Robinson (2010), many leaders and organizations in the past decade have been working to better prepare today’s graduates for a world in which academic content mastery and skills such as critical thinking, communication, technology literacy, and collaboration are required for success in college, life, and career. In line with their viewpoints, Pratt et al. 2008 asserts that the onus is now on developing a set of competencies which will prepare graduates to become successful professionals who can meet societal needs.

2.1 Definition and Characterization of the Notion of Competency

Competency-based language teaching emerged in the United States in the 1970s (Richards & Rodgers, 2001), closely linked to the notion of observable and measurable learning outcomes, or statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand, and/or be able to demonstrate after completion of learning (Cañado, 2013).

The notion of competency involves not only knowledge, but also skills, attitudes, and values, and entails the capacity to perform successfully in an academic, professional, or social environment. They do not, however, preclude knowledge or content; on the contrary, they comprise and mobilize it, infusing it with new life by transferring and applying it to real-world contexts, complex situations, or problem resolution (Pérez Gómez et al. 2009a). Consequently, they involve what Barnett (2001 : 32) terms a shift from “knowledge as contemplation” to “knowledge as operation”, and provide a more nuanced and unambiguous formulation of what the university graduate should be able to know and perform upon completion of tertiary education (Blanco, 2009 : 13).

According to European Commission (2004: 7), “Key competencies represent a multifunctional and transferable set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that all individuals need for personal fulfillment and development, inclusion and employment.” In addition, one useful distinction between ‘skills’ and ‘competence’ and how they relate to each other is provided by the OECD’s DeSeCo project:

A competence is more than just knowledge or skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilising psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context. For example, the ability to communicate effectively is a competence that may draw on an individual’s knowledge of language, practical IT skills and attitudes towards those with whom he or she is communicating (Rychen & Salganik, 2003). Moreover, the European Commission’s Cedefop glossary (2008) defines a skill as the ability to perform tasks and solve problems, while a competence is the ability to apply learning outcomes adequately in a defined context (education, work, personal, or professional development). A competence is not limited to cognitive elements (involving the use of theory, concepts or tacit knowledge); it also encompasses functional aspects (involving technical skills) as well as interpersonal attributes (e.g. social or organizational skills) and ethical values.

As Cañado (2013) expounds, in the language teaching arena, the most notorious categorization of competencies has undoubtedly been that propounded by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, 2001) for Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Assessment. Two main types of competencies are distinguished as general competencies, applicable not only to language, but to actions of all kinds, and communicative language competencies, which encompass linguistic competencies (lexical, phonological, and syntactic knowledge), sociolinguistic competencies (pertaining to sociocultural conditions of language use), and pragmatic competencies (which have to do with mastery of discourse, cohesion and coherence).

Cañado (2013) regards CEFR as assistance to anyone engaged in the design of language teaching programs by providing a comprehensive (but neither exhaustive nor definitive) guide to goal-setting, program design, and assessment. This holds true at all levels of education, including Higher Education (HE). Within the specific field of HE, however, the CEFR also offers invaluable support in designing pragmatically-relevant and competency-based language learning programs which have a high degree of transparency and comparability at a European level. Moreover, the CEFR offers significant potential in terms of learner empowerment and, thus, the development of the transferable language learning skills which students need in order to pursue the goal of life-long language learning. The other strength of CEFR is being a tool which has been designed to be used in, and adapted to, local contexts and local needs.

Cañado (2013) depicts in his book that perhaps the most influential taxonomy of competencies in current higher education is that set forth by the TUNING Project (TUNING Educational Structures in Europe, 2007). As she points, ‘this project has informed the official documents which have guided the convergence process in European countries, thereby trickling down into the Bologna-adapted degree structures, plans of study, and ECTS course catalogues (cf., for example, the white paper on degree structures commissioned by the Spanish National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA)’. These competencies are of two types: cross-curricular generic (which identify those elements common across all degrees and domains) and subject-specific (related to each thematic area or field of study). Generic competencies are subdivided into three competencies. Instrumental competencies involve cognitive, methodological, technological, and linguistic abilities which guarantee the student’s basic academic development. Interpersonal competencies, related to individual abilities and social skills. Systemic competencies pertain to abilities and skills concerning whole systems and entail a combination of understanding, sensibility, and knowledge. Moreover, specific competencies are broken down into disciplinary knowledge, or theoretical contents applied to a specific thematic area, academic competencies, or the abilities which need to be deployed in a concrete field of study, professional competencies, or know-how in a specific professional area.

In a study on more than 300 European students, Cañado (2013) asserts that systemic competencies which employers foreground and which include critical thinking skills, creativity, problem-solving, or capacity to adapt to new situations, are precisely the ones they consider to be least developed and evaluated in HE language degrees. Mir Acebrón (2008), in a study with nearly 4,500 students at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra, also observed a discrepancy between the high value attached to generic competencies and the paucity of time dedicated to their development.

2.2 A Framework for Competencies and Skills

American association of colleges of teacher education (2010) and Partnership for 21st century skills (P21) through a collaborative project established consensus around the definition of 21st century student outcomes. The P21 framework for 21st century teaching and learning has been refined over a six year period with input from hundreds of educators,

business leaders, community leaders, parents, students; and policymakers. The framework for 21st Century Student Outcomes and Support Systems embrace learning and innovation skills, information, media and technology skills, and life and career skills. The Framework describes the knowledge, skills, and expertise students must master to succeed in work and life, better to say, a blend of content, knowledge, specific skills, expertise and literacies. The framework by P21 is described as follow.

2.2.1 Learning and Innovation Skills

The focus of these skills and competencies are on creativity, critical thinking and problem solving, communication, and collaboration which are essential to prepare students for the future.

Creativity and innovation competencies refer to think creatively and work creatively with others. Students who think creatively use a wide range of idea creation techniques, create new and worthwhile ideas, elaborate, refine, analyze and evaluate their own ideas in order to improve and maximize creative efforts. In addition, work creatively with others is to develop, implement and communicate new ideas to others effectively, be open and responsive to new and diverse perspectives; incorporate group input and feedback into the work, demonstrate originality and inventiveness in work and understand the real world limits to adopting new ideas. Moreover, critical thinking and problem solving consist of reason effectively, make judgments and decisions, and solve problems. Utilizing various types of reasoning as appropriate to the situation, analyzing how parts of a whole interact with each other to produce overall outcomes in complex systems, synthesizing and making connections between information and arguments, reflecting critically on learning experiences and processes, solving different kinds of non-familiar problems in both conventional and innovative ways are subcompetencies of critical thinking and problem solving.

In the USA and Canada, Bousquet (2008: 305) accentuates that curricular reorientation should be geared to preparing graduates to “face the challenges of this world, be they academic, economic, humanitarian, diplomatic, strategic, or otherwise”, and Humphreys (2005: 31) highlights the importance of incorporating approaches that “teach students to apply academic concepts to real world contexts”. This will involve moving towards “a complex of competences and abilities that would require broader types of knowledge” (Wellmon, 2008: 293).

Communication and collaboration relate to communicate clearly and collaborate with others. Articulate thoughts and ideas effectively using oral, written and nonverbal communication skills in a variety of forms and contexts, use communication for a range of purposes, communicate effectively in diverse environments are subtypes of communication and collaboration competencies. In addition, students should have the competencies to exercise flexibility and willingness to be helpful in making necessary compromises to accomplish a common goal, assume shared responsibility for collaborative work, and value the individual contributions made by each team member.

Two pivotal works in the field of what came to be called communicative language teaching both appeared in 1978. One was Widdowson's *Teaching Language as Communication*, and the other Munby's *Communicative Syllabus Design*. The former argued for a new perspective on language teaching based on the goal of enabling learners to utilize the language effectively in a range of pragmatic and communication oriented situations. The latter emphasized the analysis of learners' needs in the target language, geared to the situations in which they would be required to use this language.

2.2.2 Information, Media and Technology Skills

People in the 21st century live in a technology and media-suffused environment, marked by various characteristics, including: 1) access to an abundance of information, 2) rapid changes in technology tools, and 3) the ability to collaborate and make individual contributions on an unprecedented scale. Being able to exhibit a range of functional and critical thinking skills related to information, media and technology make students more effective and vigorous. Information literacy, media literacy, and ICT are parts of technology skills and competencies. e.g., access and evaluate information critically and competently; manage the flow of information from a wide variety of sources, understand both how and why media messages are constructed; create media products by understanding and utilizing the most appropriate media creation tools, characteristics and conventions, use technology as a tool to research, organize, evaluate and communicate information.

According to Warschauer (2003), Shetzer and Warschauer (2000), there are four various types of literacies involved in knowing how to effectively use technology: computer literacy, information literacy, multimedia literacy, and computer-mediated communication (CMC) literacy. Computer literacy refers to the skills necessary to effectively use a computer, in the sense of the machine and its applications. Information literacy refers to the ability to "locate, evaluate, and use information" (Warschauer, 2003: 113). The third type of literacy is multimedia literacy. Multimedia literacy is the ability and competence to incorporate different types of media, such as pictures, audio, and movies as part of a text. Finally, the fourth literacy is CMC literacy, which allows users to write and understand effectively online communication, including the knowledge of "netiquette" and rules of politeness of this type of engagement.

In 2004, the ANECA conducted a survey with 4,786 university students of languages, linguistics and literature programs about the significance of several competencies and the extent to which those competencies had been developed in their courses. The results demonstrated that a competence such as "basic computer skills" was selected as the least developed of all 30 competencies, although the students considered it the 17th most important skill.

2.2.3 Life and Career Skills

Today's life and work environments require far more than thinking skills and content knowledge. Cultivating the ability to navigate the complex life and work environments

requires students to pay rigorous attention to developing adequate life and career skills. As P21 expounds, flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural skills, productivity and accountability, leadership and responsibility are regarded as life and career competencies.

Flexibility and adaptability include adapting to change which can be working effectively in a climate of ambiguity, changing priorities as well as adapting to varied roles, jobs responsibilities, schedules and contexts. Flexible students have the ability to incorporate feedback effectively, deal positively with praise, setbacks and criticism, understand, negotiate and balance diverse views and beliefs to reach workable solutions, particularly in multi-cultural environments.

Students with initiative and self-directed competencies possess the capability to manage goals and time, work independently and manage learning and opportunities to gain expertise. In addition, they can monitor, define, prioritize, and complete tasks without direct oversight, reflect critically on past experiences in order to inform future progress and demonstrate commitment to learning as a lifelong process.

Raya (2013) asserts that universities have become cognizant that employers are looking for young men and women possessing the capacity to think critically, analyze issues, solve problems, communicate effectively, and take leadership. These demands are inspiring universities to experiment with new ways of educating students. To this end, many higher education institutions are focusing on what Ramsden (2003 : 18) refers to as “general aims and higher level abilities”, including skills in self-direction , autonomy in learning, collaborative problem-solving, learning how to learn, and team-building, as well as the more traditional abilities of identifying, accessing, assimilating and communicating information. The change that many universities are introducing in their courses and programs is a shift towards a more learner-centered paradigm, including approaches such as experiential learning, communicative language teaching, task-based language teaching, problem-based learning, inquiry-based learning, and cooperative learning, discovery learning. Migletti and Strange (1998) observed a relationship between learner-centered teaching methods and student success.

In the learning society, graduates should be able to organize their own learning, regarding effective management of time and information. From a pedagogical point of view, ‘learning how to learn’ has been defined as “the procedure by which learners obtain insights about the learning process, about themselves, about effective learning strategies, and by which they develop positive attitudes towards language and language learning” (Jiménez Raya 1998: 14)

Students with social and cross-cultural competencies are competent to interact effectively with others and work effectively in diverse teams from a range of social and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, they know when it is appropriate to listen and speak, leverage social and cultural differences to create new ideas and increase both innovation and quality of work

Productivity and accountability skills are the last sub competencies in this section. Manage projects, be accountable for results, work positively and ethically, participate actively, as well as being reliable and punctual are competencies that enable learners to prioritize, plan and manage work to achieve the intended result even in the face of obstacles and competing pressures.

2.3 Research Questions

In order for the researchers to investigate teachers' perspectives on competency based language learning with regard to skills and competencies student should possess and master to succeed in education, the following research questions are put forward;

1. What are EFL teachers' perspectives on competency-based language learning?
2. Which of the subcategories of competency-based language learning is more significant in EFL teachers' point of view?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

As for the participants of this study and based on Morgan's sample population table, 100 EFL university male and female teachers, teaching courses such as General English and ESP at different universities and English institutes in Mashhad Iran, were asked to fill out a competency- based language learning questionnaire. Majority of these teachers had an average teaching experience of 4 to 20 years whose native language was Farsi and their educational status was M.A. and above.

3.2 Instruments

3.2.1 Competency-Based Language Learning Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed by the researchers in consultation with some experts. Given the lack of standard definitions and consensus on a specific set of skills and competencies it was decided to adopt as broad and comprehensive a definition, nomenclature and list of such competencies as possible. In order for this to happen, they were selected from the conceptual framework described in whitepaper, a collaborative project by the American Association of colleges of teacher education and the Partnership for 21st century skills (2010), TUNING project's categorization of generic and specific competencies (TUNING educational structures in Europe 2007), and Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2001). The questionnaire consisted of 52 five point likert scale ranging from always to never, grouped under three main sections: Learning and innovation competencies, information and technology competencies, and life and career competencies. Learning and innovation competencies comprise four subtypes of competencies: work creatively with others, critical thinking, problem solving and communication and collaboration. Life and career competencies subsume three sections: flexibility and

adaptability, initiative and self-direction learning, and social and cross-cultural competencies. The reliability index of this questionnaire was estimated through Cronbach’s Alpha as .81.

3.3 Procedure

The researchers in this study aimed at finding out teachers’ viewpoints on competency-based language learning with regard to various competencies, skills, knowledge, and expertise students should master to succeed in education and lifelong learning. To this end, the researcher-made questionnaire was employed to EFL teachers at different universities and English institutes in Mashhad, Iran.

The researchers commenced data collection in October 2015 and ended in November 2015. The EFL teachers of different universities and English institutes in Mashhad, Iran attended the data collection process. The required data were collected in a quantitative mean through questionnaire. The researchers tried to be present all through the data collection process in order to boost the reliability of the answers. Once the data was gathered, it was entered into SPSS software and was analyzed with the use of Friedman Test and One-Sample Test, and finally the results were discussed in the teaching learning context.

3.4 Data Analysis and Results

As the purpose of this study was to investigate teachers’ perspectives on competency-based language learning as well as subcategories of competencies, two research questions have been proposed by the researchers. In order to find out the result, the collected data were analyzed and processed through SPSS. Each of the research questions are discussed accordingly.

In order to depict the results for the first research question, to investigate teachers’ perspectives on competency-based language learning, One-Sample Test was applied to figure out the total mean and the results are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: One-Sample Test

	Test Value=3			
	T	Df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Learning and Innovation skills	15.483	99	.000	.66007
Information and technology skills	10.639	97	.000	.87075
Life and career skills	17.348	99	.000	.75822
competency-based	18.403	99	.000	.74700

As the results in Table 1 show, the mean score is more than 3 in each category and is 3.75 in total, and the level of significant is smaller than 0.5(.00) therefore, in response to first question, teachers hold positive and optimistic view and outstand toward learners’ competencies.

To answer the second research question and in order to check the teachers' perspectives on each of the three competencies, Friedman Test was run to investigate the mean rank of each sub competency and the results are depicted in the following tables.

Table 2: Test Statistic

N	98
Chi-square	23.837
Df	2
Asymp. Sig.	.000

Table 3: Friedman Test

	Mean Rank
Learning and innovation skills	1.68
Information and technology skills	2.33
Life and career skills	2.04

Tables 2 and 3 focus on the mean rank of each competency. 'Information and technology skills' achieved the highest mean rank (M=2.33), whereas the mean rank for 'life and career skills' is 2.04, and the lowest mean rank belongs to 'learning and innovation skills' (M=1.68).

In sum, we come up to the conclusion that EFL teachers hold positive and optimistic perspective toward students' competencies in total, i.e. 'learning and innovation skills, information and technology skills, life and career skills. However, based on aforementioned results, the information and technology skills turned out to be more dominant as compared to other remaining competencies, while life and career skills took precedence over learning and innovation skills.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As it was clearly illustrated in data analysis and results, EFL teachers hold positive and optimistic perspectives and attitudes toward overall competencies students are expected to possess, learn, and master. In addition, in order to investigate teachers' views on each of the three sub competencies, Friedman Test was run once again and the obtained data proved that 'information and technology skills' turned out to be more dominant as compared to other remaining competencies. In addition, 'life and career skills' achieved the second mean rank and finally the lowest rank belonged to 'learning and innovation skills'. Accordingly, EFL teachers possessed a more profound and positive outlook towards information and technology

skills. These findings reveal that instructors put emphasis on subcategories of information and technology skills i.e. information Literacy, media literacy, and ICT Literacy. Although, life and career skills such as flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural skills are of great importance to them and have the priority over 'learning and innovation skills' in their points of view, they also stress on subcategories of 'learning and innovation skills' as critical thinking and problem solving, creativity and innovation, communication and collaboration .

The results of the present study are also in line with other reputable researches in the area. For instance, Kessler and Ware (2013) postulated that instructors must think creatively about their curriculum, the competencies, and their own learning curve with technology. As an instructor becomes comfortable with using a single form of technology for a particular task, she/ he should begin to identify potential alternative technologies for other, related, tasks. This way she/ he is also expanding his/her ability to help students develop competencies more effectively in the future.

After all, one can surely come up with the idea that the type of competencies teachers believe and more agree on can chiefly be apparent in the teaching they provide their students with. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that the teachers' social class, ideology and beliefs derived from her/ his background and experience may also influence her/ his behavior and performance in class. In addition, positive or negative attitudes and outlook of teachers depend on their own competencies. Practitioners and instructors may not hold positive and optimistic view toward learners' competencies while they are not equipped with them. For example, the teachers lack competency in using ICT, could not design lesson plans by integrating ICT as learning tools.

Besides, the findings of this study may have some hints for English teachers and educators. EFL teachers can be aware of the competencies students should possess and master to be professional in higher education context. They may change their pedagogy towards students' competencies, accentuate on use rather than acquisition of information, collaborative learning, competency-based and experiential learning, and focus on addressing students in a way that stimulates the exploration of their own ideas and interests as well as challenging them to be active. Moreover, it would be desirable to fortify external training in order to consolidate the link with the professional sphere, to deploy seminars and workshops adequately, to incorporate ICT to a greater extent; to diversify evaluation techniques. It would also be highly advisable to promote focus group sessions with both students and teachers in order to re-engineer and reach a consensus on competencies. In doing so, the role of teacher as a passive practitioner should turn into reflective intellectual practitioner to be able to integrate competency-based language teaching with competency-based language learning.

More studies, however, are required to determine competencies and skills needed and suited for each society. It would be particularly interesting to complement the outcomes obtained in the present study with a quantitative research which compares traditional and competency-based models. Since only EFL teachers participated in this research, it would also be worthwhile to administer the competency questionnaires to interdisciplinary teachers

and also to other educational settings, i.e. high schools, in order to carry out a detailed diagnosis of how it is functioning in all areas.

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