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EFL INSTRUCTORS' PERCEPTIONS AND LEVELS OF DIGITAL COMPETENCIES IN A HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT IN TÜRKİYE

(Research article)

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Abstract

Digital competencies have come to the fore in education activities under mandatory conditions due to emergencies such as the Covid-19 pandemic and have become an indispensable part of the new normal process. This study aims to explore the perceptions and levels of digital competencies of university instructors and how effectively they utilize technology in foreign language education. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 English instructors working at the School of Foreign Languages of a private university in Türkiye. Findings indicated that instructors have positive views of digital competencies and need similar digital competencies in foreign language education; they are perceived as more competent digitally although they see one another's digital competency levels as sufficient, and digital competencies are used extensively in lessons, extracurricular studies, and assessment-evaluation processes albeit school curricula do not prioritize digital competencies sufficiently. Findings also revealed that the university provides sufficient opportunities for teachers for digital competencies, but there are still various recommendations from the teachers to further develop themselves professionally and academically.

Keywords: Education Digital competencies; higher education; distance education; technology; English language teaching

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1. Introduction

1.1. Statement of the problem

The COVID-19 pandemic substantially changed the character of education globally, necessitating the use of digital technology and online learning techniques by higher education institutions. Building digital competencies became necessary to effectively navigate this new educational paradigm (Hodges et al., 2020; Koehler & Mishra, 2016). Digital competences are defined as the collection of skills, knowledge, and attitudes required to successfully use digital technology for a variety of educational goals (Atman Uslu & Usluel, 2019). Digital competence, according to Kuzminska et al. (2018), is the capacity to use Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), which are technological (hardware and software) tools that organize, produce, store, and transmit data across diverse information systems utilizing standard protocols Romani (2009). By merging computers, telecommunications, and networks, these applications enable interpersonal and multi-directional communication and collaboration. The generation, exchange, distribution, administration, and accessibility of information depend on these technologies.

The growth of digital capability has been a topic of discussion in teacher education for more than three decades (Falloon, 2020). Digital competencies are a broad category that includes a variety of topics such as instructional design in online environments, effective use of digital tools for teaching and assessment, online communication and collaboration, digital literacy, and the capacity to adapt to rapidly changing educational contexts. Digital competencies are pervasive in all levels of education, including early childhood education to higher education since the need for them has arisen due to the implementation of social distancing measures. The integration of digital resources and the proficient utilization of digital competencies to enhance instructional effectiveness have compelled teachers and academicians to acquire a certain set of digital skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are essential for integrating ICT into the educational system at all levels (Aldhaen, 2023; Cabero-Almenara et al., 2021; Robles & Braathen, 2002; Zhao et al., 2021), which created positive opinions among instructors towards the use of ICTs when there is institutional support for their implementation. This was usually evident in private institutions (Riascos-Erazo et al., 2009).

Although the COVID-19 outbreak caused the concept of digital competence to become more popular, many nations had already had policy texts, conceptual frameworks, and research studies on the topic before the outbreak. Prior to the onset of the pandemic, a number of studies posited the need of digital literacy for individuals to effectively access services, assistance, and information offered by governmental bodies, organizations, and institutions of higher education (Cruz-Jesus et al., 2016; Hardill & O'Sullivan, 2018). In this process, which has changed through time in the context of education, numerous definitions, conceptual frameworks, and literacy levels associated with the idea of digital competence were proposed to enhance the digital capacities of students, prospective teachers, and in-service teachers

(Falloon, 2020). Teachers' digital competencies have become one of the main focuses of remote education in the pandemic process since they have been demonstrated to be one of the factors that affects variations in distance education practices' breadth and quality (TEDMEM, 2020) and presents extensive prospects for enhancing individuals' digital skills (Aldhaen, 2023), which demonstrate an incremental nature and align with the current body of research (Kim et al., 2018; Pöntinen & Räty-Zaborszky, 2020).

One of the conceptual frameworks related to teacher digital competencies is Techno-Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK), which is a combination of technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge. TPACK is an approach that includes the relationships and interactions between technological, pedagogical and content knowledge and addresses the curriculum in a learning-oriented and holistic way by using technology. In the TPACK conceptual model, whose main purpose is to integrate digital EdTechs effectively in the classroom environment and support learning, the way to produce quality content is through the careful combination of three types of intertwined information sources. In essence, in the model, there is no one-size-fits-all technological solution for every teacher, lesson or teaching approach. Quality teaching and learning require an understanding of the complex relationships between these three types of knowledge and the expression of this understanding through contextually appropriate strategies (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). However, the skills, competencies or behaviors required to apply these approaches are not described in detail (Falloon, 2020).

Numerous studies have been conducted to examine the digital abilities needed by university instructors and students in conventional face-to-face learning environments. The pandemic's extraordinary effects and the accompanying shift to distant learning, however, have forced a re-evaluation of these abilities in the context of online and remote instruction. As a result, a growing body of literature focusing on the digital skills teachers and students need to successfully navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic and distance learning has emerged (Sangrà, Vlachopoulos, & Cabrera, 2012; Stöter, Bullen, Zawacki-Richter, & von Prümmer, 2018). In teacher surveys conducted internationally before the pandemic, it was stated that teachers needed various supports to improve their ICT skills (OECD, 2019b). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for teachers to have sufficient skills in the context of online learning and distance education and the need for different digital pedagogy approaches have been confirmed by the experiences gained in this process.

The purpose of the present study is to explore the perceptions of higher education English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers about digital competencies through distance education compulsorily carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic and in emergency situations such as the major earthquake in the southeast of Turkey, because of which almost all the educational institutions have been urged to close and continue education through online education either synchronously or asynchronously, or both in most cases. As the current study has been extended through the periods when face-to-face education as well as emergency distance and

hybrid education models have been carried out in higher education institutions, the participants had the chance to compare their perceptions towards these periods, too. Having a broader investigation of the research questions yielded us the chance to see how the situation is handled in higher education institutions in Türkiye, which led us to a point where we have a better understanding of the importance of the assessment of digital competencies so as to be able to increase effectiveness, efficiency, productivity and motivation of instructors.

1.2. Literature review

1.2.1. Global policies and practices regarding digital competencies

According to UNESCO (2022), today's societies are more affected by developments in the field of information and technology compared to the past and are progressing depending on these developments. For this reason, in order to achieve the goals that societies want to achieve in the 21st century, it is necessary to create a workforce with the digital competencies necessary to be creative in knowledge production and an expert in problem solving. Teaching is one of the professional groups that has an important role in the task of bringing societies to 21st century goals. According to OECD (2019a), teacher digital competencies are often at the center of national digital strategies and policies aimed at improving the digital literacy or competence level of the population. In the European Union's Digital Education in Schools in Europe Report for the 2018-2019 academic year, digital education indicators include teachers' digital competencies and countries' policies on this issue (European Union, 2019). The report, which includes 43 national education systems, analyses primary and secondary education levels. According to the report, in around 50% of European education systems, the inclusion of teacher digital competencies in teacher education is encouraged in high-level legislation. However, at which level and how they are addressed is often left open-ended. In teacher surveys conducted internationally (European Union, 2019; OECD, 2019b), many teachers stated that they needed support to improve their ICT skills. For this reason, in addition to pre-service teacher training, various activities such as in-service trainings, professional learning communities and networks are carried out in many countries to support the professional development of teachers working in educational institutions within the scope of digital competencies. According to the European Union's findings in 2019, in almost all education systems in Europe, there are a number of activities aimed at developing teacher digital competencies.

Another study that focuses on digital competencies, but most relevant in the context of higher education is Higher Education Digital Competence (HeDiCom). The framework incorporates four distinct aspects pertaining to the digital competencies of teachers such as the use of digital technologies in teaching practice, the facilitation of students' preparedness for engagement in a digital society, the digital literacy skills possessed by teachers themselves, and the ongoing professional development opportunities available to teachers in the realm of digital competencies (Tondeur et al., 2023). One of the most recent policy documents on teachers' digital competences is the European Union's Digital Education Action Plan for 2021-

2027 (European Union, 2021). This action plan aimed to provide the necessary support in areas where there is a need for streamlining and building resilience in education and training. The plan highlighted that digital competencies should be core skills for all teachers and other education staff and should be embedded in all areas of teachers' professional development, including student teacher training.

The Digital Competences in Language Education Report (Fominykh et al., 2019) presents four perspectives on the digital competencies of language teachers: (1) individual, (2) organizational, (3) national, and (4) European. While national and European policies have been established, it is worth noting that not all national policies provide sufficient detail regarding the organizational aspects of digitalization implementation and the methodological utilization of digital technologies. Therefore, the responsibility for addressing this issue is with the organizations involved or the individual educators themselves. The majority of enterprises have not yet provided comprehensive specifications for the digital capabilities required for new language instructors in their digitalization initiatives. The organization of staff training opportunities to enhance digital skills is mostly infrequent or sporadic in nature. Simultaneously, the majority of educators see such training as beneficial for their professional growth and exhibit a positive disposition towards the integration of digital technology in the realm of language instruction. Similar results were revealed in a comprehensive study carried out by the United States Department of Education (2016) as part of the National Educational Technology Plan.

In another study conducted in the United States, the Quality Matters Program created assessment rubrics containing national criteria to certify the quality of online courses and online components, including higher education level, and these rubrics have become nationally recognized, faculty-centered quality tools. The standards for course development rubrics developed by the Quality Matters Program consist of eight sections as the course overview and introduction, learning objectives and competencies, assessment and evaluation, teaching materials, course activities and student interaction, course technologies, student technical support, accessibility and usability and exam security. In addition, especially in the United States context, International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) has contributed to the development of another noteworthy framework for digital competences. The ISTE Standards for Teachers delineate the fundamental technological proficiencies that educators need to possess. The ISTE standards include many domains, including learner, leader, citizen, collaborator, designer, facilitator, and analyst (Crompton, 2017).

1.2.2. Previous studies

While it is certain that the steep learning curve experienced in the digital context during the Covid-19 pandemic has contributed to the development of teachers' digital competencies, there are not yet enough studies concentrating on ICT, teacher and teacher candidate digital competence levels, and incorporation of digital literacy into instructional methods. For example, one of the findings of the European Union Digital Education Action Plan is that

digital content creation is one of the areas where staff working in education and training need the most improvement (Yanlı, 2021). In a national study conducted in the United States, the inefficiency of activities prepared for teachers' professional development and the lack of a digitalised curriculum were listed as barriers to effective digital learning (List et al., 2020). In another study, Tejedor et al. (2020) highlighted the need of improving key factors, such as the digital competencies of teachers and students together. The authors proposed a reconsideration of higher education pedagogy, emphasizing key areas for change, namely communication, instruction, and digital literacy. Similar results were obtained by Karaoğlu et al. (2020) who stated that the changing roles of teachers and students in the digital transformation process should be evaluated comprehensively. The majority of studies have reached the consensus that although academics often exhibit favourable attitudes towards digital literacy, their knowledge and skills in digitalization are typically self-acquired, which requires professors to undergo training in order to develop digital competencies (Baro et al., 2019). Likewise, in Gudmunsdottir and Hatlevik (2018), even though the majority of the instructors believed that ICT is beneficial, they also complained that the ICT education they received was of poor quality. Further, according to a thorough systematic review of the relevant literature (Alférez-Pastor et al., 2023; Başaran, 2017; Fernández-Batanero et al., 2021; Petersson, 2018; Zhao et al., 2021), both instructors and students at higher education encountered difficulties in effectively utilising digital competencies within their educational practices, regardless of their status as digital natives or immigrants.

According to scholars (Bozkurt et al., 2021; Sellnow-Richmond et al., 2020), digitilization is a concept that can present challenges such as lack of interaction among students and instructors. For instance, Sellnow-Richmond et al. (2020) established a correlation between reduced levels of interaction and a reduction in both class time and the time taken to complete assignments. Deficiencies in communication were also mentioned in several other studies (Arora & Srinivasan, 2020; Erarslan, 2021; Shim & Lee, 2020; Karadağ & Yücel, 2020). Another difficulty is related to additional time spent on teaching the course material. Koban Koç and Koç (2021) reported that online courses necessitated additional effort and more intricate tasks in order to compensate for the absence of inherent social interaction in traditional classroom settings, as well as the challenges associated with monitoring students' engagement and responses to lessons delivered synchronously or asynchronously. Similarly, in Bergdahl and Nouri (2020), there was a perceived necessity for additional time to elucidate the process of transferring course contents and materials, as well as establishing learner expectations at the outset of classes. This is because the implementation of this novel teaching mode necessitates the cultivation of unique and demanding skills, along with specific conditions and prerequisites.

The perspectives of English teachers at higher education institutions about their perceptions of their digital abilities have not received much attention in the literature except for some studies by (Aktürk & Öztürk, 2019; Ardıç & Çiftçi, 2019; Ergen, 2019; Köse, 2016; Özel & Arıkan, 2015) among others. Moreover, a significant portion of the existing research is

dedicated to the analysis of digital or media literacy and digital competencies of pre-service teachers (Atar et al., 2019; Başal & Kaynak, 2020; Canbulat, 2022; Guillén-Gámez et al., 2019; Kibar & Özer, 2020; Laguitao et al., 2021; Lázaro-Cantabrana et al., 2019; Sarıçoban et al., 2019; Schieble, 2010; Sert & Li, 2017; Tseng, Cheng, & Yeh, 2019). Indeed, the majority of individuals are already considered digital natives, possessing a high level of proficiency in using technology. Nevertheless, there is a tendency to overlook in-service teachers, who mostly belong to the category of digital immigrants and may possess limited technological skills (Howlett & Waemusa, 2018; Lee & James, 2018).

Therefore, the current study aims to ascertain the general and unique perceptions of EFL instructors working in higher education institutions regarding digital competencies in general and in terms of language education, how teachers perceive one another's levels of digital competencies, what kinds of digital competencies are required in language learning processes, how intensively digital competences are used in in-class and out-of-class activities, and what kind of opportunities they are offered to improve their digital competencies.

1.2.3. The current study

In this study, the digital competencies of EFL instructors are investigated from a broad perspective to gain insights about how they teach and prepare for life with their digital skills. As it is crucial for instructors to utilize their digital skills in the teaching-learning processes, understanding their position towards these competencies is significant to integrate them into curriculum and national policies. The domestic and international literature reviews partially reveal their perspectives on this general but currently crucial issue regarding the curriculum, classroom activities, assessment-evaluation activities, institutional, and national levels. Qualitative research studies that deal with this issue in depth are almost non-existent, in fact, no research designed like this present study has been found. Therefore, the primary goal of this study is to comprehensively address the digital competences of EFL teachers working at a private university. This study aims to address the following research questions:

1) In which areas of education do EFL teachers need digital competencies?
2) What are the perceptions of EFL teachers towards the integration of digital competencies on the following topics?
    a) Institutional curriculum and in-class and out-of-class educational activities
    b) Assessment and evaluation
    c) Professional and personal development

2. Method

The current study aims to gain participants' in-depth insights into the subject in various dimensions through their reflections on their experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak and after the major earthquake disaster, both of which altered the relative importance

of digital competencies. It also seeks to qualitatively examine and discover the attitudes of EFL teachers at the higher education level towards digital competencies. In particular, data regarding the natural conditions of social behaviour regarding the context were gathered for this study using the Grounded Theory approach described by Creswell and Clark (2004), which ultimately paved the way to inductive analyses of the data, through which the concepts were developed as findings.

2.1 Setting and participants

The participants were 10 (7 females, 3 males) Turkish and native or foreign EFL instructors teaching at a private university's school of foreign languages located in İstanbul, Türkiye. They were aged 31–51 (mean age: 39.7 years). The instructors were chosen on a voluntary basis. Three instructors had also administrative roles such as level coordinator and curriculum development team member as well. Typical case sampling was used from purposeful sampling techniques.

2.2 Data collection and instruments

Ethics committee approval was obtained from the university in which the research took place (Approval number: 2023/01-17). Written informed consent was obtained from the participants in accordance with the research protocol governed by the ethical procedures of the university. Primary data were collected from the participants through one-to-one semi-structured interviews either face-to-face or online on the Zoom platform. The interviews were conducted in Turkish. In order to examine the perspectives of the interviewees, evaluate their experiences, and obtain a comprehensive understanding of their perceptions regarding their digital competencies, they were prompted to provide detailed descriptions, comments, and elaborations to the questions. The interviews lasted approximately 26 minutes on average. They were recorded and then fully transcribed for the purposes of data analysis. The member checking technique was used to guarantee the correctness and clarity of the data before each interview was conducted (Anfara, Brown & Mangione, 2002).

3. Data analysis

788 minutes of data, which is equal to 13 hours and 8 minutes of recordings, were collected in total throughout the interviews. In total, approximately 65,000 words were transcribed from these interviews. An Inductive Thematic Analysis approach was utilized to identify the interconnected themes present in the qualitative data. The initial phase involved the process of open coding, wherein the textual data was systematically deconstructed into distinct units or excerpts. Subsequently, axial coding was employed to establish associations and relationships among these codes. Lastly, selective coding was undertaken to identify a central category that encompasses and encapsulates the essence of the research findings, thereby connecting all the codes and categories derived from the analysis under explanatory themes. In this regard, the

analysis of the data to identify themes was carried out in accordance with the six-step procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Additionally, the computer-supported analysis of qualitative data was conducted in order to enhance the convenience of data storage, coding, theme creation, and conceptualization of findings. During the computerized analysis of the qualitative data, the transcribed interview corpora on MS Word documents were uploaded on the Atlas.ti Qualitative Data Analysis Software web version on web.atlasti.com. This online software was utilized to organize the data and apply automatic open coding techniques within an exploratory framework, just to have a holistic perception. The objective then was to identify codes and uncover recurring themes within the participants' responses and grasp an overall understanding of the context.

To ensure the validity and reliability of their study in several ways, member checks, disconfirming evidence and thick, rich descriptions were partly utilised. Diverse sources were searched for outcomes that were comparable and dissimilar. The interview questions as data collection tools were reviewed by two professors in the field of English Language Teaching. According to their comments, the number of questions were decreased from 20 to 12, the unclear and obscure questions were revised, and complex statements were reworded in order to increase reliability and validity as suggested by Creswell and Clark (2004). As for member checks, responses to 20% of the data that were chosen at random were examined by a PhD-holding academician with relevant experience. A 77% consistency rate between the researcher's and the second coder's results was determined to be sufficient for the analyses to be deemed credible. In order to improve the dependability of the data analysis, the inter-coder reliability rate is recommended to exceed 70% (Anfara, Brown & Mangione, 2002).

4. Results

In the light of the first research question, which explored areas of education teachers need digital competencies, two major themes emerged as given in Table 1 below: (1) needs for digital tools and skills both in distance and face-to-face education and (2) improved digital competencies especially after distance education: Covid-19 pandemic as the turning point for changes in use of digital tools, teaching practices, and even the daily habits.

Table 1

Themes and codes regarding the EFL teachers' perspectives toward digital competencies

Themes	Sub-Themes & Codes
Needs for digital tools & competencies	Digital tools Cutting-edge digital technologies Digital skills Skills for distance education Skills in face-to-face education Integration and adaptation Higher education policies and curriculum Negative attitudes
Improved digital competencies	Synchronous lessons Preparations for lessons Assessment and evaluation Professional and personal development Schools' efforts to improve digital skills Digitalization

Needs for digital tools and skills both in distance and face-to-face education. Teachers mentioned numerous specific skills that are necessary for conducting lessons effectively, maintaining healthy communication with students, assessing their language learning processes and adapting to the school environment. Teachers emphasized digital skills with a broad perspective and mentioned selecting the best digital tools and gaining the relevant knowledge for them. For instance, instructor 4 highlighted deciding how useful the relevant skill would be for her job while instructor 6 counted several fundamental skills such as downloading, setting up, uploading and adapting. On the other hand, instructor 1 mentioned the use of apps, for example, knowing the languages of Zoom and Teams, and instructor 10 elaborated on understanding the features inside Zoom. 'Trying different digital tools and integrating something new' was voiced by instructor 6, and then this was mentioned through the expression 'using all of these in a way that can optimize student learning' by instructor 7, who also stated that "we needed to be technically fast. We also had to learn some shortcuts quickly'.

In fact, well-rounded elaboration was made by instructors who mentioned various dimensions of language classes. Instructors 6 and 1 explicitly used the terms online synchronous lessons and referred to them as digital skills. 'There were a number of skills that are generally needed before lessons, such as assigning online meetings' uttered by instructor 6, and 'making necessary preparations' mentioned by instructor 1. Instructor 8, on the other hand, discoursed several skills all together by commenting 'as teachers, we need to find contents and texts, prepare materials, process information, simply copy-paste, shoot, upload, share videos, and produce contents for lessons'.

Quite many skills were associated with the implementation of lessons as well. For instance, instructors 7, 1 and 10 highlighted the skills of screen sharing, turning the sound on and off, brainstorming and doing a presentation during lessons in addition to instructors 2 and 3, who emphasised engaging students into lessons by such skills as providing an environment where students can share screens and thus encourage students' participation in synchronous activities. With respect to that, some skills specific to Zoom were also emphasized. Instructor-1 mentioned knowing what to do in the breakout room, and instructor 5 summarized it all by verbalizing that 'video tools such as Zoom need to be used in lessons. We not only to use them but also know the details in order to make lessons attractive'.

"Assessment" was also highlighted by instructor 3 as: 'Tasks can be improved with certain tools in assessment and evaluation. We need to know these well'. According to instructor 8, 'due to the fact that the exams are held online, it was necessary to use the assessment, evaluation, and exam tools without any problems'. In a similar manner, several participants gave examples of digital tools without the name of the tools but rather defining or categorizing them, like e-mails or new websites and new apps. Instructor 8 made his argument more specific by saying that: 'In-class tools that will increase interaction, platforms that provide access to information, platforms where we access information are needed'.

Teachers had some concerns and reservations towards the digital competencies needed in distance education, but they had a positive attitude toward the necessities for improving their digital skills for the better. To this end, instructor 7 stated that 'distance education required more digital competence for teachers'. Taking all the attitudes given reference to from the data, what instructor 3 maintained in his own words is worth noting along these lines below:

We may need to learn how to use them effectively. At first, there are many functions, but how can we use them effectively? That's the question. I needed something like this to see how to create an environment that would enable more student engagement.

The digital competencies mentioned by the teachers mostly cover the skills and tools that are expected to be used while teaching in the physical classroom environment. Moreover, it was clear that teachers hold various perspectives on digital competencies needed in face-to-face education, mostly positive but relatively negative with concessions and restrictions.

The references from the data require further elaboration with focus on several points. Teachers were observed to approach face-to-face classes by referring to basic technological skills. Instructor 5 put stress on:

Having a command of the projector is a must. Moving from the normal image on the computer to the smart desk and from there to the projector, that is, changing the books and contents actually seems like simple command knowledge, but for a teacher who does not know how to do this, it is a process that can take even half of the lesson.

Some cutting-edge digital technologies were also given reference in the data. While instructor 1 shortly shared her experience with games played with QR codes, instructor 8 drew

attention to the use of artificial intelligence in students' written productions by claiming that: 'A vital digital competence that comes to the fore again today, I think, is the control of the content students write on artificial intelligence tools. We have to know the details of that very well'.

Apart from technological devices, plenty of websites were also exemplified by teachers. While instructor 9 described them as 'online learning platforms that we use to prepare different activities', instructors 1, 2, 6, 7, 8 and 10 gave the names of such digital tools as Khas Learn, Turnitin, WordWall, Padlet, Mentimeter, quiz websites such as Quizizz and Quizlet, and online dictionaries. Furthermore, applications and programs like MS Word, Highlighter, Kahoot, and FlipGrid were given as examples by almost all instructors. Also, videos, visuals and QR codes were mentioned as digital contents by instructors 2 and 4.

Improved digital competencies after the Covid-19 pandemic. As the main cause of transition to emergency distance education mode in higher education institutions, Covid-19 pandemic was highlighted as well. For instance, instructor 1 stated that she learned everything she needed thanks to distance education. Another teacher who thought that pandemic was the shift point by honestly disclosing that she was unable to use many digital tools before the pandemic. In contrast, instructor 5 approached the pandemic from a different perspective by saying that:

There was a difference, frankly, I didn't feel the need to use a lot of things in detail during the pandemic period. I thought what I knew was enough for me. Sharing the screen, doing this, doing that, etc., simple operations, I would say, the main buttons of the application that appear on the screen, but I do not feel that these are enough in the current process. I think that digital content skills gain importance along with digital skills with digital usage.

The second research question examined perceptions of teachers towards the integration of digital competencies especially with respect to institutional curriculum and in-class and out-of-class educational activities, assessment and evaluation, and professional and personal development. The following themes emerged: 1) Positive attitudes towards the schools' efforts to improve digital competencies 2) Lack of awareness of integration of digital competencies in national higher education policies and curriculum.

Positive attitudes towards the schools' efforts to improve digital competencies. Instructors had mostly positive attitudes towards implications of digital competencies in classrooms and out-of-class activities. As instructor 2 states:

Teachers use at least one digital platform in every lesson, either to give feedback or for the production, especially for the student to write on screen so that everyone can see the contents. In the classroom, for example, they type it on Padlet so that everyone can see or have the photo of the page taken, and it is shared on Teams, or they take photos and project it. From there, he opens the student's production on Word. So, they always do something digital. They get engaged in lessons thanks to their digital competencies.

Teachers also believe that digital competencies are effective in assessment and evaluation processes. They have generally positive perspectives, but some concerns and recommendations for the better as well. Teachers referred to assessment only when they highlighted the successful integration of digital competencies into testing and evaluation. For example, instructors 1 and 3 expressed their positive opinions as follows respectively:

In terms of assessment and evaluation, we don't normally do much in face-to-face education, except that I know Turnitin is used for some long-written exams. But of course, it is used to a great extent in the online period. In other words, if our courses continue online, it will be used intensively in assessments and evaluation.

…there were times before the pandemic when speaking exams were only done by speaking to the computer in front of the camera. Also, the students used to record a video in one of the portfolio tasks. Nowadays, we use digitilization much more in assessment and evaluation. For example, we do a lot of online exams.

Some teachers felt positive about the institutional support in terms of digital competencies. For instance, instructors 1 and 9 reported that they gained from the training they received from the university's Professional Development Unit. Some participants, on the other hand, focused merely on the fact that the school provides the instructors with decent digital equipment, especially laptop computers, but they also highlighted the importance of developing digital competencies as much as owning digital devices. Instructor 10 expressed his perception by clarifying such supports with positive and negative points, saying that: 'The opportunities it offers are mostly in the form of digital platforms and digital devices, but when we look at it in terms of competence development, it seems like there is not much'.

As for teachers sharing what they know with one another rather than expecting all from the institution, there were varying perspectives as well. It was observed that instructors mostly depend on specific events to share competencies. This was verbalized by instructors 6, as follows: 'The meetings were held weekly until last year. In the last 5-10 minutes, there was a sharing of knowledge and experience, such as a new tool, a new teaching method, a new activity'. The most interesting finding about how teachers perceived the institutional support for digital competencies was that the teachers were more inclined to elaborate on the negative feelings rather than the positive ones reflecting on their own experiences of difficulties with digital work and held stronger arguments on how it could be better. In fact, the negative perspectives uttered by teachers were not always explicitly stated. They did not claim that the school provided them with no support. They preferred hedging instead. Instructor 5 said, 'frankly, I don't find the school successful in this regard', and instructor 7 stated, 'unfortunately, I don't think it offers much opportunity at this point'. Some teachers claimed that such opportunities were not offered to the current teaching staff, but rather to the new colleagues who recently joined the coterie. As instructor 7 stated: 'Currently, the school does not do much to improve the digital competencies of experienced in-house instructors'.

There was another negative response implying that school did not offer enough opportunities for digital competencies, but the reason for presenting it here separately is that the participant, instructor 10, focused on the changes on this subject before and after the pandemic periods, and stated that: 'I did not feel such a special effort from the very beginning. But after the pandemic, yes, there is more effort and especially interaction between teachers'.

Deeper analysis on the code "negative attitudes" yielded another unique perspective from one of the participants who marked her dissatisfaction with the support for teachers by pointing out the target group of such support activities. Claiming that digitally competent teachers are ignored and not prioritized in the planning of professional development activities on digital contents, instructor 5 said that:

There is such a focus on teachers who are not digitally competent that it is never thought that teachers with high digital competency can get bored of this and become dull. When the school can't offer digital competencies adequately, teachers with high digital competencies at school become like people who have to get the job done. You know, like, well, sir, I couldn't do this, like, can you handle it, as a matter of fact, we also pretend to be an IT person in teaching, so I think the school should offer much more solid support in this sense.

Lack of awareness of integration of digital competencies in national higher education policies and curriculum. To begin with, many teachers' utterances made it obvious that they feel the lack of emphasis on the digital technologies in the curriculum. Instructors 1, 4, and 5 respectively stated their arguments as follows: 'When we try to continue with the same curriculum that we conduct face-to-face even though we teach online on digital platforms, of course, it does not work, and students get bored. We need a new curriculum for digital competencies'. 'The digital dimension in our curriculum is definitely not clear and sufficient, which I think should be'. 'Although so many people benefit from these online digital resources, although they are used almost every day, it seems like a shortcoming to me that it is not in the curriculum'.

5. Discussion

Addressing the research questions demanded comprehensive analysis of the data, and thus yielded several themes, one of which was the conclusion that most of the participants had similar needs for digital tools and skills both in distance and face-to-face education. In surveys conducted at the international level, most teachers stated that they needed support to improve their ICT skills as well as declaring similar improvements needed by their students (TEDMEM, 2021). In addition, as Bergdahl and Nouri (2020) stated, the implementation of a new teaching mode requires training in unique skills as well as specific conditions and prerequisites. This argument provides an explanation of the theme seen in the current study, which suggests that instructors place more emphasis on the importance of digital abilities rather than digital technologies in traditional classroom settings. However, in the context of distance education, their priorities are reversed, with a greater focus on digital tools.

Before the pandemic, several studies reported that it was necessary for individuals to possess digital literacy to access services, assistance, and information offered by governmental bodies, organizations, and educational institutions (Cruz-Jesus et al., 2016; Hardill & O'Sullivan, 2018). Therefore, instructors need to undergo training in order to develop digital competence as their knowledge and skills in digitalization are mostly self-acquired (Baro et al., 2019). This finding was consistently reported by a significant number of participants in the current study, underscoring their self-directed efforts in enhancing their digital abilities primarily as a result of personal responsibilities. In the Digital Competences in Language Education Report (Fominykh et al., 2019), a majority of the educators see such training as beneficial for their professional growth and exhibit a positive disposition towards the integration of digital technology in the realm of language instruction. As per the authors' analysis, the findings of the current study are mostly favorable. The conclusions drawn in the report exhibit a significant degree of similarity to the data obtained from the current study.

Another finding related to the first research question was that almost all the participants felt that their digital competencies improved to a great extent especially after distance education. It was clearly concluded that Covid-19 pandemic was given reference as the turning point for changes in use of digital tools, teaching practices, and even the daily habits. This argument was rich in the literature as the number of studies on digital competencies has increased drastically for the last few years. The findings of the current study are similar to the results obtained from studies in the literature (Bozkurt, 2020; Nalbantoğlu, 2021). It can be said that Covid-19 has accelerated the digital transformation in EFL education in higher education, as in many sectors and the intensive use of technology in the field of education, together with the urgent distance education process, put teachers and students, who are the main people in the field of education, in a digitalization process. In addition, according to the results obtained in other qualitative research, some instructors have improved themselves in preparing digital education materials. There has been an increase in the use of digital tools by some instructors. It is among the results obtained that easy access to information is provided. Similar results were obtained in previous studies (Ardıç & Çiftçi, 2019; Gökbulut, 2021).

As for the results regarding the second research question, the participants typically exhibited favorable views towards the higher education institutions' endeavors to enhance their digital proficiencies with regard to curriculum and assessment. Teachers see the accessibility of digital resources, training sessions, and the exchange of successful teaching strategies with colleagues as beneficial. They still have several recommendations for enhancing professional and personal growth chances. A noteworthy discovery, which bears resemblance to our own results, is the observation by Riascos-Erazo et al. (2009) that there exists a greater prevalence of positive opinions towards the use of ICTs when there is institutional support for their implementation. This phenomenon is particularly evident in private institutions as opposed to public ones, or in connection with the nature of the individual's affiliation with the university. It seems the authors’ perspective is still valid in higher education institutions as this phenomenon was elucidated by the narratives provided by the participants in the research.

The lack of awareness about what is happening in terms of integration of digital competencies at higher education level can be accounted for the results reported in Karaoğlu et al. (2020) who focused on the investigation of the notion of digital transformation in education during the transition to society 5.0. The authors reported that the roles of teachers and students in this transformation process should be reevaluated, the digital transformation process ought to be in the context of EdTechs, the digital transformation process and applications in the world and the applications and studies in the digital transformation process in Türkiye need to be disseminated to the society, especially the members of higher education institutions.

To this end, the participants' perspectives in our study were not deep enough to let them gain and use digital competencies as effectively as possible for language education, which supports Bozkurt et al.'s (2021) recommendations that action plans within the scope of the strategic planning should include not only concrete technologies such as tools and infrastructure, but also abstract technologies such as digital literacy, literacy, approach, and theory, which aim to effectively use these technologies.

6. Conclusion and limitations

The current research was conducted with the aim of investigating the digital competencies of university instructors in an extensive manner within the setting of higher education in Türkiye. The generalizability of these findings to other groups remains uncertain due to the distinctive nature of the phenomenon under investigation. First of all, the participants in the study are restricted to 10 teachers. As the findings are limited by the study's small sample size in comparison to the total number approximately 15.000 instructors in about 190 higher education institutions in Türkiye, they should be considered with caution and validated by conducting similar studies with larger numbers. Furthermore, the study has been delimited to digital competencies as a broad topic, also referred to as ICT skills in the field (Tinio, 2003). These skills are further categorized into sub skills. However, rather than investigating each sub skill individually in detail, this study aims to get an overview of perceptions about digital competencies. In addition, the participants were from a single university. More universities, public and private, could be used for more in-depth analysis and results. Further, the supervision of the demographics that were represented in the study was hindered as a result of the uneven distribution of male and female respondents as there were a small number of male teachers at the institution. When extrapolating about the possible consequences of gender-based digital competences, which was not the primary focus of the research, this demographic was not taken into consideration in the analysis and was thus omitted.

Most importantly, although a hybrid period of distance and face-to-face education simultaneously flourished in the context of the study by letting the participants experience various types of language education during and after the Covid-19 pandemic and the major earthquake in the south-eastern Türkiye, the data collected from the participants were also affected by all the sudden and mandatory changes in the delivery of the instruction, distance

and online as either synchronous or asynchronous, face-to-face or hybrid. Thus, the findings of this study should be interpreted in light of these unique conditions.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests and Ethics

"The authors declare no conflict of interest."

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