

DIGITAL COMPETENCE: EXPOSING THE PERCEPTION AND LEVEL OF ENGLISH TEACHERS IN IPER**Ismailov Kamolatdin Kurultayevich**

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Abstract. Covid-19 pandemic has expedited the global transformation towards digitalization, making digital competence a fundamental requirement needed to effectively navigate in digital world. This study aimed to identify the perceptions and level of digital competence among English teachers in rural primary institutes in Tashkent. Utilizing a quantitative approach, 10 English teachers from all 3 primary institutes participated in the survey. The respondents were chosen via purposive sampling. The questionnaires were administered online via Google Form. Data were analyzed based on descriptive statistics with SPSS software version 27. Findings revealed a high level of teachers' perception towards digital competence, revealing a positive outlook. Teachers' digital competence levels predominantly fall within the B1 (Integrator) level, indicating an intermediate competence. Analysis of each dimension also revealed that Dimension 2 (digital resources) obtained the highest while Dimension 6 (facilitating learners' digital competence) records the lowest score. These findings revealed that there is a commendable progress observed through teachers' integration of digital tools into their teaching practices. However, there is still a need for an effective continuous professional development program that tailored specifically to address teachers' facilitation of learners' digital competence.

Keywords: Digital Competence, Perception, Level, English Teachers, IPER

Introduction

The global outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented situations across the globe. Following the outbreak, the education sector in 184 countries around the world had to enforce widespread institutes closures at its height in April 2020, and by mid-April, 94% of learners around the world had their education disrupted. Such scenario has increased the demand for sustainable alternative solutions as well as accelerated the widespread adoption of digitalization as the reliance on these digital technologies continues to grow. In times of the pandemic, the integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and digital skills of the participants involved were at a high level (Chavez, et al., 2020). It was also reported that in order for students to become relevant with virtual education, they were required to utilize and master the technological tools needed.

Furthermore, the development of a future-ready workforce equipped with digital skills and competences is crucial as it in line with the demands of the Forth Industrial Revolution (4IR). Along with the ongoing technological advancements, the emergence of the digital, physical, and biological technologies has transformed the way we live, work, and interact. In the context of 4IR, it encompasses emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, Internet of Things, big data, and automation (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). Additionally, the World

Economic Forum (WEF) estimated that around 65% of students entering primary institutes today will eventually work in profession that have not come into existence yet (Yusuf, Walters & Sailin, 2020). Therefore, in order to stay relevant, the educational landscape is expected to be transformed in order to nurture workforce that is capable of fostering innovation, embracing digital technologies, as well as contributing to economic growth (Qureshi et. al., 2021). To do so, teachers' role needs to align with this evolution by shifting from the conventional approach into a more innovative teaching. The approach should focus more on students' learning where teachers act as the facilitator of learning, rather than solely providers of information. To deal with students who are "digital natives" and accustomed to technology from a young age, teachers are also required to be "digitally competent", thus highlighting the vital role of digital competence among teachers.

Literature Review. Digital Competence and English Language Learning

Digital competence was traditionally defined as the ability of effectively utilize information technology (IT) within specific contexts (Rizza, 2014). However, with the rapid advancement of information technology, the definition has expanded to encompass various relevant aspects. Digital competence refers to the skills, knowledge and attitudes involved during the utilization of digital technology, either for learning, work, or social involvement in a confident, critical, and responsible manner (Vuorikari et al., 2022). In order to be deemed "digitally competent," individuals should be able to demonstrate the ability to adapt to the ever-changing technologies, such as advancements in artificial intelligence (AI), as well as capable of critically evaluating and applying the knowledge to new situations. It is important to note that, being a "digitally competent" individual goes beyond possessing the technical skills of using digital tools. It covers the required knowledge to deal with digital tools, as well as the appropriate skills and attitudes.

This emerging trend towards digitalization and online learning implies the needs for teachers to revise their teaching approaches. As online learning differs greatly from the face to-face interaction in the classroom, teachers are required to reimagining the teaching and learning process and equip themselves with the necessary digital skills (Ramalingam, et al., 2021). Advanced facilities, such as computer laboratories, smart classrooms, and science laboratories only become beneficial once teachers and students alike know how to effectively utilize the technology and equipment in meaningful ways. This highlights the importance of developing teachers' digital competence before they can empower students' learning via integration of ICT in the classroom.

As aforementioned, in Uzbekistan, has recognized the importance of leveraging ICT for effective education. They further highlighted in the blueprint the needs to focus more to the underserved groups of rural and under-enrolled institutes as the ICT usage was found to be limited. The limited usage in the rural and under enrolled institutes happened due to several factors such as insufficient training and supporting services, limited ICT infrastructure and teachers lack of competencies in dealing with the digital tools. These findings align with previous research by Wang et al (2020) who observed significant variations in teachers' usage of ICT.

Teachers in the rural institutes were more reliant on the resources provided at the national and country level, while teachers in urban institutes tended to rely on self-produced resources and live streaming. This discrepancy has resulted in a digital divide between institutes in rural and urban areas as teachers possessed different personalized instructional resources, which could potentially impact students' learning experiences.

Consequently, developing teachers' digital competence is seen as crucial, as it could influence teachers' behavioural intention to integrate ICT in the classroom, particularly in the rural institutes. Existing studies have consistently demonstrated that teachers with higher levels of

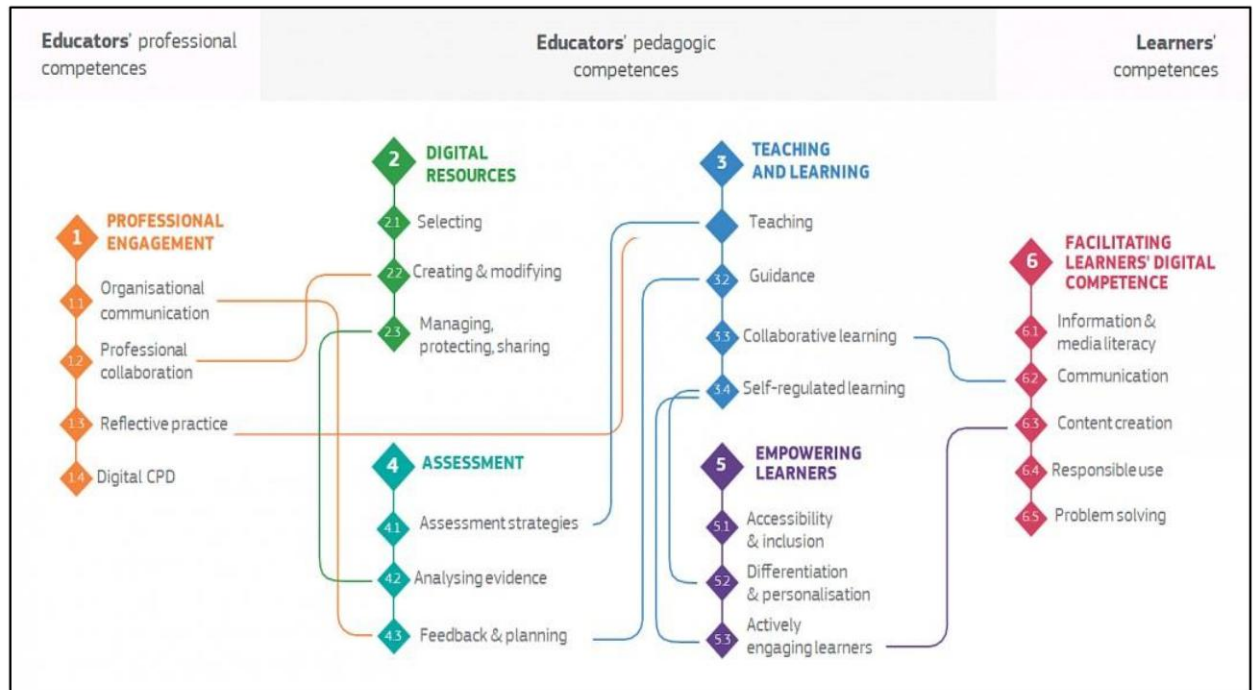
digital competence are more inclined to incorporate ICT into their instructional practices. The findings of these studies Demissie et al (2022); Antonietti et al (2022); Rahimi & Tafazoli (2022) indicated a positive correlation between teachers' perception of their digital competence and their intention to adopt technology in the classroom. When teachers are proficient in using ICT, they would have a deeper understanding on how to use digital tools effectively, such as selecting appropriate technologies, designing engaging learning activities, as well as providing constructive feedback to the students. As teachers become more competent and confident in their abilities to navigate and utilize digital tools, their motivation to integrate ICT into their teaching and learning is heightened.

In the context of English language learning, the relationship between digitalisation and English language learning is frequently associated to each other (Bucur & Popa, 2017). By integrating language, learning content and digital skills, learners were able to improve their digital competency, language proficiency as well as mastery of the content (Pitarch & Mora, 2021). Yunus et al (2013) revealed that the usage of blog has helped to promote ESL learners' writing skill. Similarly, the integration of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) method and Quizziz (e-learning) has facilitated the acquisition of English vocabularies for language learners (Huei et al., 2021; Yunus et al., 2016; Ström & Fröjd, 2021). Other findings from Alakrash & Razak (2021); Stefanovic & Klochkova (2021); Hidayat et al (2022) also indicate that digital tools promote better understanding, autonomous learning, and increased learner motivation, hence highlighting the significance of teachers' digital competence.

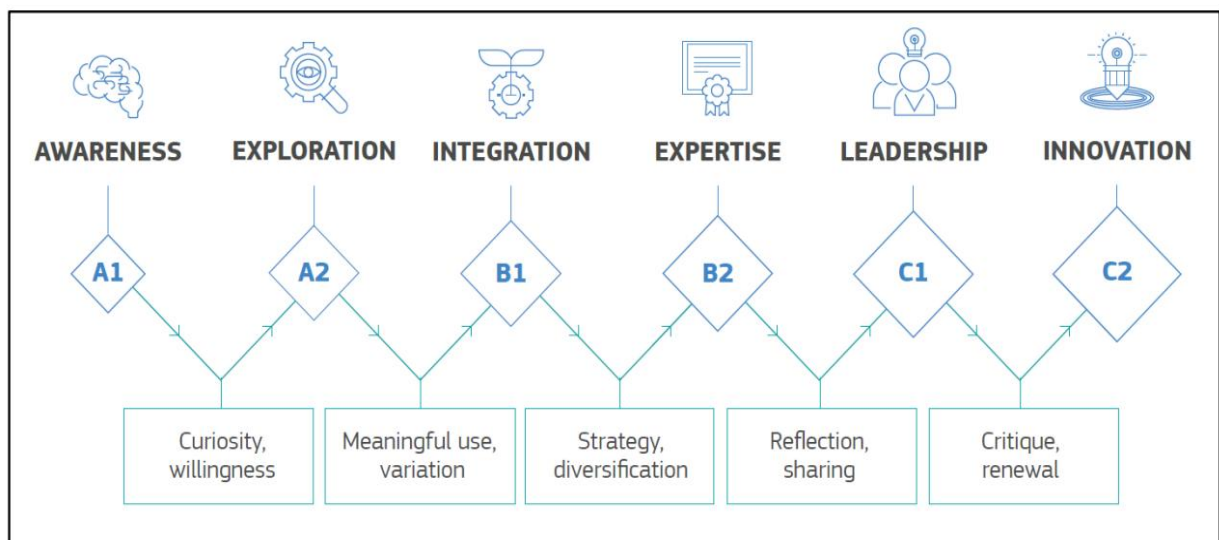
Digital Competence of Educators (DigCompEdu)

To assess and support the development of digital competence, various international frameworks and models have been introduced worldwide. One of the most commonly used and modelled frameworks is the "European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens," or known as DigComp which was first introduced in the year of 2013. From its first publications, DigComp has undergone a few updated versions and the latest version of the framework is called "DigComp 2.2," which was published recently in 2022. DigComp also provided other specified frameworks such as "DigCompConsumers" for consumers in the digital marketplace, "DigCompEdu" for educators across all levels of education and "DigCompOrg" which is specialised to support the development of digital competence in organisations.

The European Framework for Digital Competence of Educators or also known as "DigCompEdu" was published by the European Commissions' Joint Research Centre in response to the increasing needs for educators to have a set of digital competences specifically tailored to the teaching profession (Redecker & Punie, 2017). The framework, which was developed for educators in particulars, consists of 22 educator-specific digital competences, organized in six dimensions as illustrated in Figure 4. The six dimensions entails different areas of: (1) Professional engagement, (2) Digital resources, (3) Teaching and learning, (4) Assessment, (5) Empowering learners and (6) Facilitating learners' digital competence. The framework also acts as a guideline for educators across all level of educations to leverage the digital technologies to its utmost potential in improving the quality of education. As digital technologies have become ubiquitous and pervasive in our life, this framework is seen relevant with the current needs.



The Framework additionally outlines a progression model to assist educators in evaluating and improving their level of digital competence. It describes the six phases that an educator's digital competence normally progresses through in order to assist them in taking further actions. The competence stages are linked to the six proficiency levels specified in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), ranging from A1 to C2. As the CEFR taxonomy is widely recognized and used, its adoption will aid educators' understanding of their personal level of digital competence by providing a common language. As aforementioned, there are six proficiency levels for the digital competence, which consists of: (1) Newcomer or A1, (2) Explorer or A2, (3) Integrator or B1, (4) Expert or B2, (5) Leader or C1 and (6) Pioneer or C2. The DigCompEdu progression model is further illustrated in Figure 2 below.



As for this study, the DigCompEdu is adopted due to several reasons. The framework was specifically developed for educators across all levels of education, starting from early childhood to higher and adult education (Redecker & Punie, 2017). It also includes vocational training, special needs education, as well as non-formal learning contexts. Moreover, the DigCompEdu

framework was recognized as the most adequate to be used as theoretical support for delivering a MOOC on Teacher Digital Literacy (Cabero-Almenara, Romero-Tena & Palacios-Rodríguez, 2020). Similar study was done to compare and assess the feasibility of DigCompEdu framework and Common Framework for Teaching Digital Competence (INTEF) and results showed that DigCompEdu was the most recommended by experts (CaberoAlmenara et. al, 2020). Besides, the framework also allows educators to assess their own personal level of digital competence and identify the areas that they are still lacking at. Based on these gaps, educators would be able to take further actions based on the outlined competences in the framework. This continuous learning could foster a continuous professional development of educators, thus making their instructional practice to become more effective and meaningful.

In view of the above and taking as a basis the European Framework for Digital Competence of Educators (DigCompEdu) this study attempts answer the following research questions:

1. What is the perception towards digital competence of English teachers in rural primary institutes in Uzbekistan?
2. What is the level of digital competence of English teachers in rural primary institutes in Uzbekistan?

Methodology

In answering the aforementioned research questions, a quantitative approach was employed by the researcher. A quantitative approach involves the measurement and analysis of phenomena through the collection and interpretation of quantifiable data (Atmowardoyo, 2018; Rashid & Sipahi, 2021). One of the categories under quantitative methods is survey research (Rashid & Sipahi, 2021). Creswell (2009) stated that survey research analyses a sample of a population in order to yield a quantitative or numerical description of trends, attitudes, or views within that population, which aligns with the objectives of this undertaken study.

Research Participant

For this study, English teachers who are teaching in all 3 primary institutes located in Tashkent district were involved. The 50 participants were chosen via purposive sampling. As the research focuses on English teachers in rural primary institutes, the selection of these participants is deemed relevant as they fulfilled the criteria outlined. Purposive sampling or judgment sampling refers to the process in which the researcher uses his or her judgment or a particular purpose while selecting the participants (Rahi, 2017). Out of the 10 teachers approached, 8 sets of completed questionnaires were received, resulting in a commendable response rate of 79.59%.

Research Instrument

A survey questionnaire was used as an instrument for the data collection and the items were adapted from the “DigCompEdu” self-assessment tool (Appendix A). Participants were able to identify their own level of digital competence based on the accumulated scores obtained at the end of the questionnaire.

The competency level is as illustrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Description of the competency level and scores

LEVEL	DESCRIPTION	SCORE
A1	Newcomer	0 - 20 points
A2	Explorer	21 - 33 points
B1	Integrator	34 - 49 points
B2	Expert	50 - 65 points
C1	Leader	66 - 80 points
C2	Pioneer	more than 80 points

Research Procedure

Before the pilot study was administered, permission from the institutes, as detailed in Appendix B, as well as formal approval at the state level from the Department (Appendix C). Subsequently, a formal request, including a consent letter was submitted to the Education Office for approval before collecting the data from teachers in Tashkent (Appendix D). Along with the consent letter, title and purpose of the study were specified, as well as ways on how the privacy and confidentiality of the participants is ensured.

The questionnaire was administered via Google Form (online platform) to the participants. They were provided with a link to get access to the questionnaire. In accordance with ethical considerations, the participants' identity remained anonymous and confidential. Any identifying information such as names or other sensitive personal details, was not requested in the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was done by following the quantitative approach. The responses were extracted from the Google Form and transferred to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27 software. Then, descriptive statistical analysis was conducted, with the calculation of frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation.

Reliability

Reliability in research implies the consistency and stability of a measuring instrument when administered over time and under different conditions (Mellinger, 2020; Sürücü & Maslakçi, 2020). Establishing the reliability of an instrument is significant in ensuring the data gathered from a study is dependable and can be trusted.

Validity

In order to establish the content validity of a study, researchers will typically go to a panel of judges or experts to seek for validation (Creswell, 2014). Hence, three panel experts were consulted in this study to seek for validation. In the process of selecting experts for instrument validation, it is important to choose individuals who are well-versed about the study area, either based on their academic background or work experience (Fernández-Gómez, et al., 2020). Therefore, the three experts were chosen based on their expertise and experience related to the study area. After validation process, the researcher made few amendments accordingly. Details of the experts' qualification are as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Panel of experts for validation

Expert	Field of expertise	Teaching Experience
A	Doctor of Philosophy in Computer Science	31 years
B	Doctor of Philosophy in TESL	18 years
C	Master's Degree in TESL (Head of English Panel)	8 years

Conclusion

Rapid advancement of technology in this 21st century learning has transformed the landscape of how people learn and acquire knowledge. This dynamic landscape has shifted drastically after the Covid-19 pandemic, in which both teachers and learners were forced to equip themselves with digital skills and competencies in order to stay relevant. Hence, this study was carried out with the purpose of examining the perception of English teachers in regards to their digital competence, as well as actual level of digital competence that they possess.

Findings revealed that the participating teachers exhibit a positive perception towards digital competence as they viewed it as significant. They acknowledged the transformative potential of digital tools in enhancing language learning, as well as expressed their willingness to learn more about digital tools. In terms of their digital competence, these teachers are currently navigating at the B1 or known as the “integrator” level. While this level shows a commendable competency, they could progress to a higher level with experimenting more with digital tools.

While this study has revealed meaningful insights into teachers’ digital competence, it is crucial to acknowledge its limitations. As aforementioned, the current study only focused exclusively on English teachers teaching in rural institutes in Tashkent. Therefore, results could not be generalized to the entire English teacher’s population. For future research, it is recommended to consider expanding the sample size by involving more teachers from other districts, as well teachers teaching various subjects. Besides, the scope of the study can be broadened by incorporating urban institutes as well. By doing so, a comparative analysis can be conducted to identify any significant differences of teachers’ digital competence level in rural versus urban institutes. This analysis could also provide insights on the unique challenges, opportunities, as well as the relevant strategies needed to improve digital competence among teachers across various settings. Besides, future research could be done to explore the challenges that teachers face in developing their digital competence. These valuable insights would be able to help the administration as well as the policymakers to provide relevant interventions to help teachers to develop their digital competence into a higher level, thus enhancing the quality of teaching and learning.

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