English teaching in the digital era: a commitment to communicative competence

Enseñanza del inglés en la era digital: una apuesta por la competencia comunicativa

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Abstract

This paper presents a theoretical-conceptual review of communicative competence in English as a second language teaching, analyzed within the framework of the Technological High Schools of the General Directorate of Agricultural Education Technology and Marine Sciences (DGETAyCM). An Action-Research methodology was employed, conducting three action cycles with fifth-semester students from the Office Automation Technician program. Through observation, the development of communicative competence was studied using various didactic strategies supported by digital tools. The study concludes that communication is an essential tool in individual development, where technology plays a crucial role, and students must possess the necessary skills to communicate orally and in writing in multiple communicative situations.

Keywords: Communicative competence, English, digital tools, technological high school, upper secondary level.

1. Introduction

In the globalized and highly connected world in which we live, proficiency in the English language has become an essential skill for the personal, academic, and professional development of individuals. In the context of Upper Secondary Education, learning this language acquires significant relevance, as it prepares students to face the challenges of an increasingly multicultural and competitive environment. However, to achieve true mastery of English, it is essential to focus efforts on developing communicative competence, which goes beyond mere grammatical knowledge and focuses on the ability to use the language effectively and appropriately in real communication situations.

In this context, this research work aims to explore and analyze the role that digital tools through the internet play in the development of communicative competence in English at the upper secondary level. Technology has revolutionized the way we communicate and access information, and its effective integration into the language teaching-learning process can offer significant opportunities to improve the acquisition of linguistic skills.

Through a multidisciplinary approach, this research set out to analyze the development of communicative competence in the English language, supported by digital tools, considering the advantages and challenges that their implementation entails in the English teaching process at the upper secondary level. Previous studies, academic research, and pedagogical experiences related to the use of technology in language teaching were examined, in order to identify good practices and effective strategies.

2. Problem Statement

The study stems from the need to respond to the transformations that education is undergoing in the digital era, especially in foreign language learning. At the upper secondary level, English teaching faces the challenge of adapting to the communication and knowledge dynamics of the 21st century, characterized by constant access to information, global interaction, and technological mediation. In this context, the proposal to develop communicative competence in English through the use of digital tools arises, with the purpose of strengthening the linguistic and communicative skills of students through more dynamic, flexible, and interactive learning environments.

Traditional English language teaching, historically centered on the transmission of grammatical rules and vocabulary memorization, has shown limitations in the face of current demands of competency-based education. Globalization, the digitalization of knowledge, and the growing need for intercultural communication have reconfigured the purposes of language teaching, which now seeks not only understanding of the linguistic system, but also the development of social, cognitive, and technological skills that allow effective interaction in real and virtual environments.

From this framework, the research draws on the competency-based approach as the

guiding principle of educational design. This approach, promoted by international organizations such as UNESCO and the OECD, proposes that learning should go beyond the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, orienting itself toward the development of transferable capacities that allow students to act effectively in different contexts. In the case of language learning, communicative competence represents the convergence of linguistic, sociolinguistic, discursive, and strategic skills, which allow not only understanding and producing messages, but also interacting with relevance in different cultural contexts.

Authors such as Dell Hymes (1972) and Canale and Swain (1980) laid the theoretical foundations of this notion, establishing that mastery of a language implies more than grammatical knowledge: it requires the ability to use it appropriately in diverse communicative situations. Communicative competence is conceived, then, as an integration of knowledge: knowing, knowing how to do, and knowing how to be, which manifest themselves in linguistic interaction.

The problem statement recognizes that, despite institutional efforts to strengthen English learning, limitations persist related to low motivation, the rote approach, scarce exposure to real communicative contexts, and limited use of technological resources. Many students have difficulty applying acquired knowledge in practical communication situations, which limits their academic performance and their opportunities in globalized environments.

The research proposes that the use of digital tools and interactive resources can become an effective means to transform these limitations into meaningful learning opportunities. Virtual platforms, mobile applications, collaborative environments, and multimedia resources allow designing more personalized and student-centered learning experiences, fostering autonomy, creativity, and metacognitive reflection.

The justification of the study is based on the impact that information and communication technologies (ICT) have had on educational processes. The traditional teaching paradigm has been surpassed by the need to integrate technological tools that enable ubiquitous learning, that which occurs at any time and place, and promote the active construction of knowledge. From this perspective, the teacher adopts the role of mediator or facilitator, guiding the student in the exploration and critical use of digital resources, while the student assumes an active and responsible role in their own learning.

Likewise, the study responds to the current sociocultural context, in which young people maintain constant interaction with technology. This frequent contact with digital media represents an opportunity to link education with students' everyday interests and communicative practices. Integrating ICT in English teaching allows leveraging their technological habits in favor of academic training, enhancing both linguistic and digital skills, considered today as key competencies for comprehensive development.

Regarding the research objectives, the general purpose was established as strengthening communicative competence

in English among upper secondary level students through the use of digital tools via the Internet; the specific objectives were oriented toward designing and implementing didactic strategies that integrated technological resources, analyzing their impact on learning, and evaluating the effectiveness of said strategies in the development of communicative skills.

The central question that guided this research was: In what way does the use of digital tools through the Internet contribute to the development of communicative competence in English among upper secondary level students?

The guiding assumption of the research proposes that the systematic incorporation of ICT in the English teaching-learning process can significantly contribute to the development of communicative competence, provided it is carried out under a student-centered pedagogical approach based on meaningful interaction. In this sense, technology is not conceived as an end in itself, but as a means that expands the possibilities of communication, practice, and reflection about language.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of the research is based on the constructivist principles of learning, particularly the contributions of Vygotsky, Piaget, and Ausubel. Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes the importance of social interaction and language as mediators of cognitive development, which coincides with the role that digital tools play as mediators of collaborative learning in virtual environments. Piaget (1970); highlights the active construction of knowledge through experience, while Ausubel (1963) emphasizes the relevance of meaningful learning, understood as the integration of new knowledge into prior structures of comprehension.

These perspectives are complemented by the sociocultural approach to learning, which recognizes the influence of context and interaction in the acquisition of communicative competences. The digital environment, in this framework, becomes a sociocognitive space where students interact, construct meaning, and apply the language in real or simulated situations.

In the field of language didactics, the communicative teaching model is also taken up, which prioritizes the functionality of language and authentic interaction over mechanical repetition. This approach is articulated with the integration of ICT through pedagogical models such as TPACK (Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge) by Mishra and Koehler (2006), which underscores the need to balance three types of knowledge: technological, pedagogical, and disciplinary; the teacher's effectiveness in digital environments depends on their ability to combine these three domains in a coherent and contextualized manner.

The design of the didactic interventions was structured following the ASSURE model (Heinich et al., 1996), which provided a systematic guide for the integration of technological resources: analyze the learner, state objectives, select resources and methods, utilize materials, require

learner participation, and evaluate learning. Regarding the conceptual framework, communicative competence is conceived as an integrated set of linguistic skills (grammatical, discursive, sociolinguistic, and strategic) that enable effective interaction in different contexts; digital competence, for its part, is defined as the ability to use information technologies critically, creatively, and ethically in learning and communication. Both competences, communicative and digital, are interrelated in the English teaching process, since language proficiency requires both linguistic skills and the management of digital environments that facilitate intercultural interaction.

The theoretical framework of the study also integrates the principles of collaborative learning and the blended learning approach. Collaborative learning is based on the joint construction of knowledge, where peer exchange generates shared meanings and fosters social and communicative skills. Blended learning, on the other hand, combines face-to-face and virtual spaces, allowing greater flexibility and adaptation to student needs. These educational trends, supported by ICT, reinforce the relevance of the study and its practical application at the upper secondary level.

The analysis of background demonstrates that various international and national studies agree in pointing out the potential of digital technologies to improve language teaching. Research such as that of Warschauer (2000), Chapelle (2003), and Levy and Stockwell (2006) have documented the benefits of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and mobile learning (m-learning) in the acquisition of linguistic competences.
These authors highlight that the use of digital resources increases exposure to the language, favors autonomous practice, and allows adapting learning to the student's interests.

In the Mexican context, programs for strengthening digital competences at the upper secondary level have sought to reduce the gap between traditional education and the demands of the knowledge society. However, the implementation of technological resources in English teaching continues to face challenges related to teacher training, technological infrastructure, and resistance to change. This study contributes to this debate by demonstrating that, with adequate planning and pedagogical support, ICT can be successfully integrated into the educational process.

Thus, the above establishes a comprehensive vision of education as a dynamic and inclusive process, where technology and communication converge to form competent, critical students capable of performing in globalized contexts; English, in this sense, is presented not only as a subject, but as a tool for intercultural and professional interaction. ICT are consolidated as mediators of learning, allowing language teaching to transcend the classroom and extend to virtual spaces of practice and reflection.

Methodological Framework

The methodological framework of the study describes the research strategy employed to

analyze the development of communicative competence in English through the use of digital tools. The research was based on the qualitative approach and the action research method, due to its suitability for studying educational phenomena from the perspective of reflection, collaboration, and continuous improvement. This approach allowed understanding the interactions between teachers and students within the English language teaching-learning process, fostering the active participation of the actors as agents of change.

Action research, inspired by the contributions of Lewin (1946) and subsequently enriched by authors such as Corey, Stenhouse, Carr, Kemmis, and Elliott, is based on a cyclical process of planning, action, observation, and reflection, with the purpose of improving educational practice. In this study, the method was applied through three intervention loops, where the initial situation was diagnosed, didactic strategies supported by ICT were implemented, and the results were reflected upon to adjust subsequent actions. This process made it possible to strengthen the communicative competence of students and improve the integration of digital tools in English teaching.

The methodological design is based on the principles of the qualitative paradigm, characterized by its flexibility, openness, and emphasis on deep understanding of phenomena. This paradigm seeks to generate categories, discover patterns, and construct theory from the contextual analysis of data. The action research method was chosen for promoting active collaboration between the researcher and the participants, generating educational transformation processes from the practice itself.

The study subjects were the 17 students of group 5°A of the Office Automation Technician program at CBTa No. 285, who participated consistently throughout the entire intervention period and were enrolled in the English V course. They were selected considering their age, level of language proficiency, and familiarity with digital tools; a coding system was developed to preserve confidentiality, based on their list number, gender, and age. The group selection responded to the need to analyze how ICT contribute to the development of communicative competence in real teaching contexts.

The temporality of the research spanned from August 2021 to January 2022. During this period, three stages were developed:

Documentary analysis, which allowed the research to be theoretically grounded, reviewing concepts about communicative competence and didactic strategies.

Development of communicative competence, where the importance of English proficiency as a tool for global and professional communication was evaluated.

Application of action research loops, in which didactic strategies supported by digital tools were implemented, observed, and adjusted.

The first loop was carried out between September and October 2021; the second, from October to November of the same year; and the third, from November 2021 to January 2022. Each loop integrated didactic plans based on the expected learning outcomes of the English V program, aligned with level B1 of the Common European

Framework of Reference for Languages. Strategies centered on interaction, collaboration, and functional communication were used, in coherence with the curricular objectives of the upper secondary level.

Regarding research techniques, participant observation was employed, complemented with interviews and diagnostic questionnaires. The observation made it possible to identify behaviors, interactions, and attitudes of students during face-to-face and virtual classes. This technique was applied both synchronously, through Zoom sessions, and asynchronously, through tracking activities on the Moodle platform. These observations generated valuable information about the use of digital resources and the communicative performance of students.

The initial diagnosis included two moments: the direct interview with a key informant and the application of knowledge questionnaires to the entire group. The interview made it possible to obtain qualitative information about perceptions and experiences related to English learning through ICT. The questionnaires, for their part, measured the level of linguistic proficiency in grammar, vocabulary, listening comprehension, and written expression. The results guided the selection of didactic strategies and the planning of loop activities.

Didactic planning was an essential element to guarantee coherence between the learning objectives, strategies, and resources employed. Three plans were designed, one for each loop, following the phases of the action research cycle: plan, act, observe, and reflect. Each plan integrated content from the study program and activities supported by digital tools that facilitated autonomous learning, collaboration, and communicative practice. Planning was conceived as a flexible process that allowed adjusting strategies as evidence of student progress was obtained.

In the implementation of didactic strategies, different approaches and techniques were used to promote meaningful learning in English. Strategies for elaboration, representation, and comprehension of information were applied, as well as for the development of oral and communicative skills. Among the main strategies are: the essay, the concept map, the semantic web, the graphic organizer, the comic strip, the timeline, text scanning (skimming and scanning), inference, the blog, and public speaking.

Each of these strategies had a specific purpose within the teaching-learning process. For example, essays allowed the development of argumentative writing and critical reflection; concept maps and graphic organizers favored the structuring of ideas; comic strips and timelines promoted creativity and logical sequencing; blogs fostered interaction and digital publication; while public speaking promoted oral expression in academic and professional contexts. Likewise, strategies were evaluated through rubrics and checklists, guaranteeing formative and continuous feedback. This evaluation made it possible to identify advances in communicative competence, as well as areas for improvement in the application of technological tools.

The research demonstrated that the integration of ICT in English teaching contributes significantly to the development of communicative competence, by offering

interactive resources, promoting autonomy, and generating collaborative environments. Among the benefits observed are: universal access to knowledge, personalization of learning, student motivation, and the possibility of receiving immediate feedback. However, challenges such as the digital divide, the need for teacher training, and the strengthening of technological skills are also recognized.

Having said the above, we can synthesize that the methodological framework evidenced the relevance of the qualitative approach and the action research method as effective means to improve English teaching with ICT support. The research not only allowed understanding the learning dynamics but also transforming teaching practices through reflection and action. The implementation of innovative didactic strategies supported by digital tools strengthened active participation, autonomy, and critical thinking of students, reaffirming that technology-mediated education can enhance the comprehensive development of communicative competences at the upper secondary level.

4. Resultados

The action research process developed in the study on the development of communicative competence in English through the use of digital tools at the upper secondary level had the purpose of strengthening the linguistic skills of students through innovative strategies supported by ICT. Throughout the process, the aim was not only to demonstrate the results of using these tools, but also to understand their impact on motivation, autonomous learning, and active student participation in digital educational environments.

Regarding the analysis of the results, these comprehensively present the way in which the action research methodology, articulated with the ASSURE model, allowed designing, implementing, observing, and reflecting on student-centered pedagogical strategies. This model provided a flexible structure for integrating digital resources such as Moodle, Zoom, WhatsApp, Duolingo, and various educational applications, fostering a more dynamic, collaborative, and contextualized teaching-learning process.

Initial diagnosis and group characterization

The starting point of the study was based on a diagnosis of the students' learning styles, using the VARK instrument by Fleming and Mills. The results revealed a predominance of kinesthetic styles, which guided the design of active strategies based on practice, experimentation, and direct application of knowledge. This information was key to planning the activities of the English V course, considering the diversity of rhythms, preferences, and technological contexts of the students.

The diagnosis also allowed recognizing the existing gap between available technological resources and students' digital competences. Based on this, gradual accompaniment in the use of platforms and digital tools was established as a priority, with the objective of guaranteeing effective inclusion in virtual learning environments.

Development of action research loops and application of the ASSURE model

The development of the pedagogical intervention was structured in three loops or action research cycles, each composed of the phases of planning, action, observation, and reflection. In all cases, the principles of the ASSURE model were applied: analyze the learner, state objectives, select resources and methods, utilize materials, require learner participation, and evaluate learning and the process.

During the first loop, activities focused on the consolidation of fundamental grammatical structures, such as modal verbs, past perfect, and second conditional. Platforms such as Moodle and Zoom were used, combined with constant communication via WhatsApp. The incorporation of Duolingo supported autonomous practice of vocabulary and pronunciation, while the teacher played a guiding and active accompanying role. Initial observations showed resistance from some students toward using Moodle, although this attitude subsided as familiarity with the platform increased and its benefits became evident.

In the second loop, the work focused on consolidating previous learning through the practice of more complex verb tenses, such as the present perfect progressive. Digital tools with visual and playful components were integrated, such as Pixton for creating comics, Facebook for socializing productions, and educational videos for auditory and oral reinforcement. This stage favored motivation and collaboration, allowing notable advances to be observed in reading comprehension and in the structuring of more complex sentences.

The third loop aimed to consolidate discursive production in English, emphasizing the student's ability to express ideas, opinions, and predictions with coherence. The topics covered included Reported Speech, passive voice, and future expressions. Activities were designed so that students could integrate previous learning through the preparation of oral presentations and multimedia projects; the use of PowerPoint, audio recordings, and short video production was promoted, fostering the comprehensive application of communicative skills.

Observed results and general analysis

The analysis of the results obtained in the three action research loops showed gradual progress in the students' linguistic skills, as well as an improvement in their willingness to use digital tools. A notable increase was observed in their confidence to communicate in English, both orally and in writing, and a greater understanding of grammatical structures. Additionally, collaboration, self-learning, and responsible use of technology competencies were strengthened.

The ASSURE model proved to be an effective methodological framework, as it allowed the integration of ICT in a planned and reflective manner. The logical sequence of the model facilitated the coherent selection and application of digital resources, as well as constant evaluation of progress. Likewise, the flexibility of the approach allowed real-time adjustments according to the group's needs and feedback.

Another relevant finding was the transformation of student attitudes toward technology. In the initial phase, many students showed insecurity and

unfamiliarity with the use of digital platforms. However, upon completing the intervention, a widespread acceptance and more active participation were observed. In this way, students recognized that the use of digital resources allowed them to improve their understanding of the language and

develop autonomy in their learning.

Pedagogical implications and transformation of teaching practice

The described process allowed observing a significant transformation in the teaching and learning dynamics. The teacher's role evolved from a traditional function of knowledge transmitter to a role of mediator, facilitator, and designer of educational experiences. In turn, students assumed a more active, reflective, and critical stance, participating in the construction of their own learning through collaborative digital environments.

The use of tools such as Moodle and Zoom fostered a balance between synchronous and asynchronous instruction, guaranteeing the continuity of learning beyond the face-to-face classroom. These platforms facilitated constant interaction, online task submission, and timely feedback. In parallel, the use of mobile applications such as Duolingo or Pixton provided a motivational and creative component that encouraged continuous language practice.

In methodological terms, the research demonstrated that technology-mediated education can contribute significantly to the development of communicative competence, as long as it is accompanied by solid didactic planning and formative evaluation. The combination of face-to-face, virtual, and collaborative activities proved key to maintaining the group's attention and commitment.

5. Conclusions

The conclusions derived from the analysis of results highlight the effectiveness of digital strategies in English teaching. The use of technological resources allowed students to develop the four communicative skills in an integrated manner, fostering meaningful and contextualized learning. Likewise, the flexibility of ICT enabled the personalization of activities and adaptation to the different learning styles present in the classroom.

The study also showed that the incorporation of ICT is not a merely technical process, but essentially pedagogical. Its success depends on the teacher's ability to select, adapt, and integrate digital resources coherently with the learning objectives; in this sense, continuous teacher training in digital competences and instructional design is presented as a necessary condition to guarantee educational quality in hybrid environments.

Likewise, it was identified that the implementation of digital tools contributes to equity and educational inclusion, provided there is sufficient access to technological resources and connectivity. Therefore, the importance of institutional policies aimed at reducing digital gaps and promoting equitable access to technology-mediated education is raised.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings obtained, various

recommendations are proposed to optimize the integration of ICT in English teaching. First, it is suggested to strengthen teacher training programs in the pedagogical use of technology, covering not only technical aspects but also didactic and assessment strategies. It is necessary that teachers know the tools, but above all, that they understand how to adapt them to the communicative purposes of the language.

Second, the development of comprehensive assessment systems that reflect communicative skills in digital environments is proposed. Online platforms allow dynamically evaluating listening comprehension, oral and written production, as well as interaction in real or simulated contexts; this requires rethinking traditional assessment instruments to incorporate rubrics, digital portfolios, and multimedia evidence.

Similarly, the importance of promoting collaborative learning through interaction in networks and virtual communities is highlighted. Online group activities, forums, and shared digital productions stimulate cooperation, cultural exchange, and the joint construction of knowledge. The social dimension of learning thus takes on a central role in the development of communicative competence.

Finally, it is proposed to strengthen the institutional culture around the use of ICT. This implies having adequate infrastructure, technical support staff, clear policies for technological updating, and academic management oriented toward innovation; the creation of multimedia resource centers, teacher accompaniment programs, and spaces for pedagogical experimentation will favor the consolidation of a sustainable digital educational ecosystem.

In conclusion, it can be mentioned that this research demonstrates that the integration of digital tools in English teaching not only improves the linguistic performance of students but profoundly transforms the educational experience. Technology, when used with an intentional pedagogical approach, becomes a means to foster creativity, autonomy, and collaboration, essential elements of 21st-century education.

In this context, English teaching ceases to be conceived as a process centered on the memorization of structures and vocabulary, to be assumed as a space of meaningful communication mediated by technology. The research confirms that digital learning enhances communicative competence insofar as it promotes interaction, reflection, and practical application of the language in real contexts. The current challenge for educational institutions lies in maintaining a balance between technological innovation and pedagogical purpose. Integrating ICT with educational purpose, promoting teacher training, and guaranteeing technological inclusion are indispensable steps toward a more equitable, participatory, and relevant education. In this way, the English teaching-learning process is projected as a space for continuous transformation, where technology becomes a bridge toward global communication, critical thinking, and the construction of sustainable learning communities.

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