ORIGINAL PAPER

A SWOT Analysis of Specific Competences in Foreign Language Teaching

Laviniu Costinel Lăpădat[1] , Maria-Magdalena Lăpădat[2]

Abstract :
Foreign language education requires an intricate balance of linguistic, cultural, pedagogical, and technological competencies. This paper employs a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis to evaluate specific competencies necessary for effective foreign language teaching. Strengths include linguistic proficiency, intercultural competence, and communicative methodologies, whereas weaknesses consist of digital literacy gaps and difficulties in adapting to diverse learner needs. Technological advancements, interdisciplinary collaboration, and innovative teaching methodologies present significant opportunities. Conversely, resistance to change, rigid curricula, and disparities in teacher training pose considerable threats. Through this analysis, recommendations are formulated to optimize foreign language instruction and enhance teacher preparedness.

Keywords: *foreign language teaching, competencies, SWOT analysis, linguistic proficiency, intercultural competence, digital literacy.*

[1]Assistant Professor, Ph.D, University of Craiova, Faculty of Letters, Department of Applied Modern Languages, Craiova, Romania, Phone: 0040773985380, E-mail: lapadat_laviniu@yahoo.com. ORCID ID: 0000-0001-6107-1011.
[2]Assistant Professor, Ph.D, University of Craiova, Faculty of Letters, Department of Applied Modern Languages, Craiova, Romania, Phone: 0040731297911, Email: magda_faurar@yahoo.com. ORCID ID: 0000-0003-2299-4977.

1. Introduction

Foreign language education has acquired new relevance amid global migration, digital globalization, and increasingly multilingual societies. Foreign language teachers are now expected to fulfil roles far beyond language transmission. They are cultural mediators, digital facilitators, inclusive educators, and curriculum designers. This multifaceted expectation calls for a wide array of professional competences - linguistic mastery, intercultural competence, pedagogical agility, and digital fluency among them.

Yet, despite growing recognition of these needs, education systems often fall short in preparing or supporting teachers to develop and maintain such competences. Initial training remains uneven across regions, continuous professional development is inconsistently funded or implemented, and many teachers face systemic barriers such as rigid curricula or lack of technological infrastructure. The result is a persistent misalignment between what is pedagogically desirable and what is institutionally feasible.

This study examines the landscape through a qualitative SWOT analysis of competences for effective foreign language teaching. Competence development is treated not as a purely individual responsibility but as a function of internal teacher capacities and external system conditions. The analysis maps existing strengths and recurring weaknesses, highlights opportunities for innovation, and identifies threats that limit adoption of improved practice.

The paper has three aims: (1) to delineate the competences demanded by contemporary foreign language education, (2) to evaluate the ways institutional and policy contexts support or constrain their development, and (3) to propose recommendations for strengthening teacher preparation and ongoing professional support. These aims are addressed through three guiding questions: What are the core strengths and weaknesses in current teacher competences? Which contextual factors create opportunities or threats for competence development? How can policy and teacher education be realigned to sustain growth over time?

2. Literature Review

Effective foreign language teaching requires a convergence of multiple competencies that are cognitive, cultural, and technological in nature. These competencies extend beyond linguistic knowledge to encompass pedagogical dexterity, digital adaptability, and intercultural fluency. Over the past three decades, educational theorists and practitioners have sought to codify these professional capacities through competence frameworks, empirical studies, and pedagogical models.

2.1 Linguistic Proficiency as Foundational Competence

Linguistic competence remains the cornerstone of foreign language instruction. Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis posits that learners acquire language most effectively when exposed to comprehensible input slightly above their current proficiency level. This input is typically mediated by the teacher, whose proficiency must exceed the highest levels expected of students. Swain (1985) complemented this view with the Output Hypothesis, asserting that producing language under teacher guidance is equally vital for internalizing structures. Together, these theories underscore the dual role of the teacher as both linguistic model and facilitator of meaningful language use.

Beyond grammatical correctness, Canale and Swain's (1980) model of communicative competence introduced a broader understanding of language use that

includes sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic components. This model shifted focus from prescriptive language instruction to functional, interactive, and contextualized communication, setting the theoretical foundation for modern communicative methodologies.

2.2 Intercultural Competence in Language Education

Intercultural competence has gained prominence in response to globalization and the increasing cultural heterogeneity of language classrooms. Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence defines it as the ability to interact meaningfully across cultural boundaries, informed by attitudes of openness, knowledge of cultural practices, and critical cultural awareness. This model integrates both cognitive and affective domains, requiring teachers not only to possess cultural knowledge but also to create environments where multiple perspectives are valued and explored.

The importance of intercultural pedagogy is further highlighted by culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010), which frames student culture as a resource rather than a barrier. It challenges traditional Eurocentric teaching paradigms by advocating instructional strategies that affirm diverse identities, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and engagement in multilingual classrooms.

2.3 Pedagogical Methodologies and Instructional Strategies

Foreign language teaching methodologies have evolved significantly from grammar-translation approaches to communicative, task-based, and content-integrated paradigms. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emerged in the late 20th century as a response to the limitations of rote memorization and decontextualized grammar drills. CLT emphasizes interaction, negotiation of meaning, and learner autonomy (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Building on CLT, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) focuses on the use of authentic, goal-oriented tasks to promote communicative competence (Nunan, 2004). TBLT positions learners as active agents engaged in real-world language use, while the teacher acts as facilitator and assessor of language-in-use rather than rote knowledge.

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), popularized in European contexts, offers a dual-focus model where subject matter and language objectives are addressed simultaneously (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010). CLIL has demonstrated effectiveness in promoting both cognitive development and language acquisition, but requires specific teacher preparation and flexibility in curricular design.

2.4 Digital Competence in the Language Classroom

Technological fluency has transitioned from a supplemental asset to an essential teaching competence in the digital age. Warschauer and Healey (1998) were among the first to highlight the pedagogical potential of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), which facilitates access to authentic materials, interaction beyond the classroom, and individualized learning pathways.

With the proliferation of mobile and web-based applications, digital competence now includes familiarity with a broad ecosystem of tools, from virtual learning environments to AI-powered tutoring systems. Stockwell (2012) emphasizes the need for intentional integration of technology into pedagogical design, warning that superficial tool adoption without pedagogical alignment can undermine learning outcomes. However, teacher education programs often lag behind in equipping educators with the digital literacy required to implement these tools effectively and critically.

2.5 Adaptability and Inclusion in Diverse Classrooms

Language classrooms increasingly reflect diverse student profiles in terms of linguistic background, cognitive ability, and learning preferences. Differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2001) is a pedagogical response that involves tailoring content, process, and product based on student readiness, interest, and learning profile. While theoretically sound, its effective application requires a high degree of planning, classroom management, and access to varied resources, capacities that many teachers are not systematically trained to develop.

Moreover, inclusive education theories stress the need for equity-driven practices that accommodate learners with disabilities or marginalized linguistic backgrounds. González (2005) and others argue that foreign language instruction often marginalizes these learners unless deliberate strategies are in place to make curricula accessible, relevant, and culturally affirming.

2.6 The Role of Continuous Professional Development

Given the rapidly evolving demands of language teaching, continuous professional development (CPD) is essential. Richards and Farrell (2005) view CPD not merely as skill enhancement but as reflective engagement with practice. They propose models such as action research, peer observation, and mentoring as sustainable mechanisms for growth. However, systemic barriers such as workload, lack of funding, and institutional inertia frequently inhibit participation in meaningful CPD, particularly in under-resourced settings.

The literature offers a clear, multifaceted portrait of the competencies required for effective foreign language teaching. These include deep linguistic knowledge, intercultural awareness, flexible pedagogical skill, digital fluency, and the capacity to differentiate instruction. However, scholarly consensus also recognizes that the development and application of these competencies depend significantly on institutional support, training quality, and policy coherence. This study uses these theoretical underpinnings to frame a qualitative investigation of how such competences function or falter in practice.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design guided by the SWOT analytical framework to explore the specific competences required for effective foreign language teaching. Rather than collecting new primary data, the research relies on documentary analysis of existing literature, case study documentation, policy reports, and teacher development program evaluations. This approach enables an in-depth exploration of how competences are conceptualized, enacted, and challenged across diverse educational contexts.

3.1 Research Design

A qualitative approach was chosen for its ability to generate context-sensitive, interpretive insights into the complex, multifactorial nature of teacher competence. SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) serves as a guiding lens that structures emergent themes while retaining analytic flexibility. Although long associated with strategic planning, SWOT has gained traction in educational research for assessing institutional and professional capacity (Ghazinoory et al., 2011). Here it is applied to interrogate the internal capabilities and external pressures that shape the professional landscape of foreign language educators.

3.2 Data Sources

The corpus comprises three interrelated strands of documentary evidence. First, peer-reviewed literature, both theoretical and empirical, on foreign language teaching competences, including work published in venues such as Language Teaching, TESOL Quarterly, and System. Second, programmatic and policy materials, notably European Commission Erasmus+ evaluations, national teacher-training frameworks (e.g., FNBE, 2016), and international benchmarking outputs such as the OECD's PISA reports. Third, documented case studies drawn from research publications and practitioner evaluations of specific initiatives (for example, implementations of Duolingo in Colombia and training models developed by South Korea's Teacher Training Institutes). Sources were purposively selected for their relevance to five competence domains synthesized from the literature review: linguistic proficiency, intercultural competence, pedagogical adaptability, digital literacy, and inclusive instruction.

3.3 Data Selection and Inclusion Criteria

Document selection followed purposive sampling. Texts were included when they explicitly addressed foreign language teacher competences or provided concrete case applications; were published between 2004 and 2024 to ensure contemporary relevance; represented diverse geopolitical and educational contexts across Europe, Asia, and Latin America; and offered sufficient qualitative detail to support thematic analysis. These parameters aimed to balance theoretical coherence with practical variability.

3.4 Analytical Procedure

Analysis unfolded in two phases. In Phase 1 (thematic coding), documents were reviewed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) model to identify recurrent concepts, phrasings, and patterned meanings. Codes were generated inductively and subsequently organized within the a priori SWOT domains: strengths (established competences and effective practices), weaknesses (internal limitations or skill gaps), opportunities (external drivers of innovation and growth), and threats (systemic, cultural, or structural constraints). Coding was conducted manually to preserve close engagement with the texts. Phase 2 (cross-case synthesis) integrated findings across contexts to surface consistencies, divergences, and contextual contingencies, moving beyond isolated cases to develop a cross-contextual account of how competences operate in real teaching environments.

3.5 Trustworthiness and Limitations

Credibility was supported through triangulation across source types and by testing interpretations against established competence frameworks, including the CEFR, ACTFL standards, and the European Profiling Grid. The study nonetheless faces limitations: it does not incorporate first-hand interviews or classroom observations; programs with documented success may be over-represented relative to unsuccessful or unpublished implementations; and the transferability of insights may be constrained by geographic and institutional particularities. Even with these constraints, the qualitative synthesis provides a strategic, evidence-informed overview of the competence landscape that is grounded in both theory and practice.

4. Findings

This section presents the findings of the qualitative SWOT analysis, drawing on documented case studies, policy evaluations, and institutional reports. Each component - Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats - represents a thematic category based

on recurring evidence from the selected documents. Together, they reveal a nuanced picture of how foreign language teacher competences are supported, constrained, or transformed in diverse educational settings.

4.1 Strengths: Demonstrated Competences in Practice

Multiple international initiatives confirm that teachers participating in structured professional development and mobility programs demonstrate strong linguistic competence and increased intercultural awareness. The Erasmus+ program, for example, has enabled educators across the EU to engage in language immersion and cultural exchange, leading to enhanced classroom practices upon return (European Commission, 2021). Romanian teachers who participated in exchanges to Spain and Germany subsequently incorporated authentic materials and cross-cultural themes into their lessons, fostering more engaged and communicative classrooms.

Dervin and Gross (2020) document classroom-based evidence where teachers with prior intercultural training facilitated rich discussions on cultural norms and language use, enhancing students' empathy and global perspective. These findings align with widespread recognition that well-prepared teachers often act as cultural mediators, helping students navigate linguistic and societal nuances.

Case evidence also shows widespread teacher adoption of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) when institutional support is available. Schools in Finland, for example, have systematically implemented CLIL modules that integrate content and language objectives. Teachers in these settings reported greater learner autonomy, higher classroom engagement, and increased oral proficiency, particularly in multilingual classrooms (FNBE, 2016).

4.2 Weaknesses: Internal Limitations and Competence Gaps

Despite expanding access to digital tools, teacher readiness to integrate them pedagogically remains uneven. Large-scale European evidence shows many teachers still report a need for further training in ICT for teaching, beyond basic technical use. In the EU-wide 2nd Survey of Schools: ICT in Education and the Eurydice report on digital education, gaps persist in ICT use and teacher competences across systems and schools, underscoring that access alone does not translate into effective classroom practice (European Commission, 2019a; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). Guidance from the UK likewise notes that technology adoption often lacks a clear pedagogical rationale and that professional development is essential if tools are to improve learning rather than remain add-ons (Department for Education, 2019; Education Endowment Foundation, 2019).

Country-level findings point in the same direction. In England (UK), TALIS 2018 reports that teachers identify advanced ICT skills as a priority professional development need, alongside support for teaching in multicultural/multilingual settings and for students with special educational needs (OECD, 2019a). In Portugal, teachers likewise report high professional development needs (especially for special educational needs), and participation in CPD is below the EU average; Romania shows similar patterns, with teachers reporting substantial need for PD in ICT for teaching and in individualised/differentiated instruction (OECD, 2019b; European Commission, 2019b; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021).

4.3 Opportunities: External Conditions Driving Innovation

Case studies from Latin America and Europe document substantial gains when technology is embedded purposefully in instruction. In Colombia, a public school initiative integrating Duolingo into the curriculum showed that students who used the app

regularly made greater gains in vocabulary retention and sentence construction compared to peers in traditional classrooms (García Botero et al., 2019). The program's success was attributed not only to the app itself but to teacher facilitation, structured reflection activities, and integration into assessment.

Pilot programs using Virtual Reality (VR) platforms such as MondlyVR in Germany and the Netherlands enabled learners to simulate real-world interactions, such as ordering food or navigating transportation. Teachers reported increased learner confidence and spontaneous speech production, particularly among reluctant speakers (Reinders & Stockwell, 2017).

The potential for individualized learning pathways is one of the most promising affordances of technology-enhanced instruction. As Lăpădat and Lăpădat (2024) note, "E-learning offers the potential for individualization and personalized instruction to meet the needs of different learners, as well as the ability to provide more flexible and convenient access to education" (p. 107).

National education systems that permit curriculum flexibility offer fertile ground for pedagogical innovation. Finland's National Core Curriculum allows for interdisciplinary planning and localized curriculum design. This structural openness has enabled language teachers to experiment with project-based learning, integrate global issues into lessons, and tailor assessments to communicative goals rather than rote recall (FNBE, 2016). Teachers in these systems reported greater professional agency and improved student outcomes, particularly in language fluency and intercultural engagement.

4.4 Threats: Systemic and Structural Barriers

Despite evidence supporting communicative and technology-enhanced methodologies, implementation often meets with resistance, especially in systems where traditional methods dominate. In a study by ACTFL (2019), language teachers in several U.S. school districts expressed scepticism toward task-based and digital approaches, citing concerns about classroom management, standardization, and test preparation. In many cases, adoption only occurred after targeted workshops demonstrated measurable improvements in learner outcomes.

High-stakes testing environments present another formidable barrier. Teachers working under prescriptive national curricula, particularly in East Asian and Middle Eastern contexts, report limited autonomy to adopt student-centred or differentiated approaches. Lessons are often structured around exam formats, and deviations are discouraged. Even teachers who possess the desired competences find themselves constrained by pacing guides, mandated textbooks, and externally imposed objectives.

Finally, disparities in training and resource availability across regions create significant competence gaps. In countries like South Korea, national-level teacher training institutes have standardized professional development and ensured high instructional quality. In contrast, many educators in rural or under-resourced schools across Latin America and parts of Europe report limited access to CPD opportunities, particularly in digital and inclusive pedagogy. These inequalities undermine system-wide improvement and reinforce existing educational divides.

To consolidate the thematic findings presented above, the following table summarizes the key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats identified in relation to foreign language teacher competences. This visual overview captures the main areas of concern and potential leverage for policy and practice.

Table 1. Summary of SWOT Findings on Foreign Language Teacher Competences

SWOT Category	Key Themes Identified
Strengths	• Strong linguistic proficiency • Intercultural awareness • Familiarity with communicative methodologies (e.g., CLT, TBLT, CLIL)
Weaknesses	• Gaps in digital pedagogy • Limited training in differentiated instruction • Inconsistent access to CPD and innovation tools
Opportunities	• Integration of AI, VR, and mobile apps for language learning • Curriculum flexibility in some national contexts • Cross-disciplinary collaborations
Threats	• Rigid, test-driven curricula • Resistance to pedagogical change • Regional disparities in teacher training and resources

These findings, when viewed in aggregate, reveal not only the current state of language teaching competences but also the systemic forces that shape their development and application.

5. Discussion

The analysis reveals a complex interplay between teacher competence, institutional context, and systemic support. While many of the strengths identified in the literature, such as linguistic proficiency and intercultural sensitivity, are confirmed in practice, their sustained enactment depends heavily on policy alignment, infrastructure, and organizational culture. In this sense, competence is not solely a personal attribute but a dynamic process shaped by external conditions.

The finding that teachers often demonstrate strong linguistic and intercultural competences aligns with prior scholarship (Byram, 1997; Canale & Swain, 1980). However, the ability to mobilize these competences consistently across diverse classrooms appears conditional on external support structures. For instance, Erasmus+ participants returned with improved language fluency and cultural insight—but only schools that encouraged pedagogical flexibility saw these gains reflected in classroom practice. This suggests that institutional culture plays a mediating role between professional development and instructional innovation.

Such mediation is equally apparent in the uptake of communicative and content-integrated methodologies. Teachers trained in CLT or CLIL often expressed enthusiasm but faced implementation barriers due to standardized testing, prescriptive curricula, or resistance from colleagues. This echoes Reinders and Stockwell's (2017) warning that competences, especially innovative ones, are unsustainable in unsupportive environments.

The realities of teaching in multicultural classrooms reinforce the need for intercultural competence to be treated as an essential, not peripheral, skill. As Lăpădat and Lăpădat (2020) observe, "teaching a foreign language to eclectic clusters of students

has become a challenge not only from a didactic standpoint but from a communication point of view as well" (p. 139). Training programs must equip teachers not only with technical and methodological tools, but also with strategies to foster sustained learner motivation. As Lăpădat and Lăpădat (2023) emphasize, "motivation represents a central element in foreign language learning, as it can significantly influence students' engagement, perseverance, and overall achievement in the language" (p. 143).

The prevalence of digital literacy gaps among teachers cannot be attributed solely to individual shortcomings. Rather, these deficits reflect systemic inconsistencies in teacher preparation and professional development. While programs such as the British Council's DIP showed promising outcomes, they also revealed the absence of pre-service training in educational technology. Teachers were expected to integrate tools they had never been meaningfully trained to use. This disconnect points to a structural flaw: the assumption that technology integration is intuitive or transferable from personal to professional use.

A similar dynamic applies to differentiated instruction. Although the literature endorses it as essential in diverse classrooms (Tomlinson, 2001), the findings indicate that few teachers receive the tools, time, or training required to operationalize it. As such, competence gaps often mirror systemic design flaws more than individual resistance or neglect.

Emerging technologies, particularly AI and VR applications, present clear pedagogical opportunities. However, the findings caution against interpreting these tools as universally beneficial or automatically scalable. Programs that succeeded did so under specific conditions: supportive leadership, aligned assessment strategies, and teacher involvement in planning. This aligns with the literature's warning that without pedagogical coherence, technology use may remain superficial or even counterproductive (Hubbard & Levy, 2006; Reinders & Stockwell, 2017).

Likewise, policy environments that offer curricular flexibility, such as Finland's, appear to catalyze methodological innovation. This reinforces the idea that opportunities, while promising, require structural alignment to translate into meaningful instructional change.

Perhaps the most pressing theme across the findings is that systemic threats, rigid curricula, testing pressures, inequitable training access, undermine competence development even in highly motivated teachers. While CPD is universally promoted in policy discourse, its uneven availability and inconsistent quality remain critical barriers. In this regard, threats are not abstract constraints but structural manifestations of policy priorities. When systems prioritize standardization over experimentation, teachers' capacity to innovate is actively curtailed.

Furthermore, the persistence of pedagogical conservatism, whether through institutional inertia or cultural resistance, complicates the integration of newer methodologies. These cultural factors must be addressed through long-term strategies that normalize reflective practice, experimentation, and collaborative inquiry among educators.

To conclude the discussion, the following key themes synthesize the interpretive insights drawn from the findings, emphasizing the systemic nature of teacher competence and the conditions necessary for its enactment.
-   Competence is contingent: Even highly trained teachers struggle to apply their skills when structures are rigid or unsupportive.

- Systems produce gaps: Weaknesses in teacher capacity often reflect omissions in initial training or lack of continuing development.
- Opportunities require orchestration: Technological or methodological innovations are only effective when implementation is context-sensitive and strategically scaffolded.
- Threats are embedded: Systemic resistance to change is less about individual reluctance than about institutional design and policy orientation.

These themes suggest that advancing teacher competence requires not just better training, but systemic realignment that repositions teachers as active agents within a flexible, innovation-friendly ecosystem.

6. Conclusion

Using a SWOT lens, this study shows a consistent pattern in foreign-language teaching: strong linguistic and intercultural strengths coexist with gaps in digital pedagogy and inclusive practice, while innovation opportunities (AI, VR, CLIL/TBLT, curriculum flexibility) are often blunted by test-driven accountability and uneven access to meaningful CPD. The central implication is systemic: teacher competence is enacted, not merely possessed, so its expression depends on coherent alignment among preparation, professional development, curriculum and assessment, leadership, and infrastructure.

Accordingly, improvement strategies should move beyond deficit framings of individual teachers to a strengths-based, system-sensitive approach that (i) protects classroom autonomy for communicative and content-integrated methods, (ii) funds sustained, practice-embedded CPD in digital and inclusive pedagogy, and (iii) realigns assessment so that communicative outcomes, not only recall, are valued. Sustained learner motivation should be treated as a design principle across these reforms.

8. Limitations

This synthesis relies on documentary analysis; it lacks primary data (e.g., observations, interviews) and may over-represent successful cases reported in published evaluations. Cross-national differences limit the generalizability of some claims.

9. Future Research

Priorities include longitudinal classroom studies tracking competence enactment during reform, comparative analyses of national training and assessment frameworks, teacher-narrative work on autonomy and CPD, and equity-focused studies in under-resourced contexts.

Authors' Contributions:
The authors contributed equally to this work.

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