

TASK-BASED NEEDS ANALYSIS OF TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCES IN ONLINE LANGUAGE TEACHING

Rita Feigina

Riga Technical University, Latvia

ABSTRACT

Post-pandemic transformations have accelerated the integration of digital technologies into education, resulting in both an increase in the number of students and greater diversity within socio-emotional classrooms, particularly in the context of English as a Second Language acquisition. In this context, teachers face the challenge of adapting task-based language teaching methodologies to diverse needs. This paper investigates learners' perspectives on teachers' professionalism in online environments through a task-based needs analysis. A mixed-method approach was applied: quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire, and qualitative insights were gathered from focus groups. Results revealed three key competences valued by learners: clear communication, flexible scheduling, and empathy. These qualities demonstrated strong correlations, underscoring their combined role in effective online teaching. Findings highlight the importance of continuous professional development that addresses both digital competences and psychological resilience. The study contributes a methodological framework for supporting teacher training and curriculum design in socio-emotional, digitalized classrooms.

Keywords: *online language teaching, task-based needs analysis, focus group discussion, learners' perspectives, teachers' professional competences*

Introduction

Online education has long been a central focus for researchers across multiple disciplines, particularly in terms of its sociocultural dimensions and its impact on both educators and learners. Moore (1993) introduced the concept of transactional distance, describing the psychological and communicative gap between instructors and students in online learning, which is influenced by the level of interaction. Effective online learning, therefore, depends on the quality of relationships among participants, enabling meaningful communication and information exchange. Optimal online interaction balances teacher and student roles across five types of interaction: student-teacher,

student–student, student–content, student–interface, and student–environment. Studies suggest that positive attitudes toward the learning experience are critical for effective communication in digital contexts (Yilmaz & Karaoglan Yilmaz, 2019; Çağıltay et al., 2001; Yilmaz & Keser, 2017).

In recent years, online education has become increasingly prevalent, particularly for English as a Second Language (hereinafter – ESL) instruction, allowing learners from diverse cultural backgrounds to engage with language learning flexibly and accessibly. Moore (1993) emphasizes that self-autonomy and self-regulation are central to effective distance education. Task-based and individualized approaches, supported by digitally categorized content, enable learners to achieve personalized learning goals. Successful online language acquisition relies on flexible time management, regular progress monitoring, and structured opportunities for engagement with instructors, peers, and learning materials. Recent studies confirm these principles: Tunjera (2023) showed that WhatsApp groups can enhance peer interaction and reduce transactional distance, while Abuhasna and Alnawajha (2023) highlighted the importance of integrating diverse theoretical frameworks to address gaps in transactional distance theory.

Teaching in socio-emotional, multilingual online classrooms requires educators to adapt their methods to meet learners’ linguistic, cultural, and cognitive needs. Teacher professionalism, cultural sensitivity, and pedagogical competence are therefore critical for effective ESL instruction. Salmon’s (2000) five-stage e-moderating model provides a structured framework to promote student engagement and interaction in online learning. The first stage, *access and motivation*, focuses on preparing and motivating learners by ensuring they understand the learning objectives and the technological tools through which interaction will occur. The second stage, *online socialization*, emphasizes the importance of peer interaction, collaboration, and adaptation, fostering a supportive digital community. In the third stage, *information exchange*, learners actively participate in discussions, complete assignments, and share knowledge, consolidating foundational understanding. The fourth stage, *knowledge construction*, involves learners in deeper cognitive processes through projects, reflective activities, and complex tasks that promote the integration of concepts. Finally, the fifth stage, *development*, enables learners to apply and process knowledge in practical contexts, engage in higher-level interaction, and assume teaching roles within the online environment, thereby reinforcing both mastery and autonomy. Salmon positions educators as e-moderators, guiding learners, sustaining engagement, and structuring meaningful online interactions.

Subsequent research has expanded on these principles: Martin, Sun, and Westine (2020) reviewed effective strategies for engagement and course design; Dhawan (2020) emphasized task design for effective online learning; Koran and Sarnou (2024) demonstrated how e-tivities can enhance intercultural communication skills; and Morong and DesBiens (2017) provided guidelines for culturally responsive online learning.

The task-based language teaching (hereinafter – TBLT) approach has been widely studied for its effectiveness in fostering communicative competence. Nunan (1989, 2004a, 2004b) emphasized the design of authentic, real-world tasks that enable learners to

achieve meaningful communicative outcomes. Ellis (2003a, 2003b) highlighted tasks' role in interaction and negotiation of meaning, while Willis and Willis (2007) underscored skill integration and learner autonomy. Skehan (1998) examined cognitive demands, and more recent studies (Ellis, 2021a, 2021b; García Botero & Guimón, 2022; Li & Zhang, 2023; Kim & Lee, 2020) have explored digital, multimodal, and hybrid applications of TBLT. A central insight is that tasks should focus on meaningful communication, while attention to linguistic form remains embedded within authentic problem-solving (Ellis, 2021a, 2021b; Long, 2015a, 2015b; Doughty & Williams, 2020).

Building on these theoretical and empirical foundations, this study applies task-based principles to online English language learning, aiming to conduct a needs analysis through a survey of adult learners. The goal is to identify learners' perceptions of the professional qualities and competencies of online language teachers and to explore challenges and opportunities for enhancing curriculum design in digital learning environments. The research addresses the following questions:

1. What characteristics do learners consider essential for an ideal digital teacher, based on task-related needs?
2. What is the optimal availability of an online teacher to support task-based learning?
3. How do learners evaluate the importance of teacher feedback and guidance in facilitating task completion?

To answer these questions, the study draws on Moore (1993), Salmon (2000), Nunan (2004a, 2004b), Ellis (2003a, 2003b), Skehan (1998), and Long (2015a, 2015b, 2000), reinterpreting their concepts within post-pandemic online learning environments. Previous studies (Moore, 1993; Salmon, 2000; Ellis, 2021) highlight the importance of transactional distance, structured interaction, and authentic tasks. These frameworks form the basis for the present task-based needs analysis in online ESL contexts. The survey data form the basis for the second stage of research: task-based needs questionnaire analysis.

The Significance and Relevance of the Study

This study addresses challenges arising from the digital transformation of education post-COVID-19, focusing on socio-emotional online ESL classrooms where educators must adapt task-based language teaching (TBLT) strategies to diverse linguistic needs.

It synthesizes key theoretical frameworks to advance teacher professionalism and intercultural competence. Moore's (1993) Transactional Distance theory emphasizes structured dialogue and learner autonomy to reduce psychological and communicative barriers in online learning. Salmon's (2000) e-moderating framework offers a phased approach for creating inclusive, culturally responsive digital environments. Within TBLT, Nunan (1989, 2004a, 2004b) highlights authentic, real-world tasks that integrate multiple language skills, while Ellis (2003a, 2003b, 2009, 2017a, 2017b, 2021a, 2021b) emphasizes the balance between communicative practice and explicit attention to form, ensuring sensitivity to cultural diversity. Recent research on student engagement in digital learning (Karaoglan-Yilmaz et al., 2022) further supports the importance of these approaches.

Building on these foundations, the study proposes a professional development framework to enhance teachers' socio-emotional competences and digital literacy. It offers practical guidance for designing task-based instructional strategies that increase learner engagement and improve outcomes. This study aims (a) to examine the impact of TBLT on post-COVID-19 online learning environments and (b) to evaluate learners' awareness and perspectives on task-based online English language teaching. Overall, the research bridges theory and practice, providing actionable recommendations for teacher training and curriculum design in socio-emotional, digitally mediated classrooms.

Methodology and Research Design

This study employs an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, using qualitative data to explain and enrich the findings of the quantitative phase (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). The research was conducted in two stages.

In the first stage, a needs analysis questionnaire assessed learners' expectations regarding the professional competencies of online language teachers. Quantitative results were then analyzed to identify patterns and priority areas for instruction.

In the second stage, these findings were discussed in a focus group, allowing learners to reflect on and elaborate their perspectives. Qualitative insights from the discussion were integrated with the questionnaire results and relevant literature to provide a comprehensive interpretation of learners' needs.

Research methodology phases

The study began with the administration of the task-based needs analysis questionnaire. Responses were analyzed to highlight key competencies and instructional priorities. Building on these results, a focus group discussion facilitated deeper exploration of learners' experiences and expectations. Finally, the quantitative and qualitative data were combined to form a holistic understanding of the professional competences most valued in online language teaching.

Applying task-based approach to needs analysis

The task-based approach to needs analysis examined learners' requirements in relation to real-world tasks expected in academic or professional contexts (Ellis, 2017a, 2017b; Long, 2015a, 2015b). Relevant tasks were identified through analysis of authentic communicative situations, such as participating in negotiations, writing formal reports, or engaging in collaborative discussions, prioritizing practical, goal-directed language use over abstract content (East, 2021a, 2021b).

Data were collected using questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions, with learners reflecting on real-life situations where they faced linguistic or communicative challenges. Task simulations were also implemented to clarify which competencies required reinforcement. This triangulation of methods enhanced validity and reliability (Ellis, 2018).

The analysis focused on task-specific skills and strategies rather than generalized language proficiency, considering linguistic, interpersonal, and technical competencies needed for successful performance, for example, effective collaboration in virtual meetings (Long, 2015a, 2015b).

Findings directly informed curriculum development, guiding the design of targeted training modules. For instance, if report writing was identified as a challenge, instructional activities included realistic simulations like drafting formal documents or composing business correspondence, aligning with task-based curriculum design principles (East, 2021a, 2021b).

Finally, learners' progress was assessed through structured evaluations of authentic task performance. Feedback from these assessments was used to refine instruction, creating a cyclical and reflective process that ensures teaching remains responsive to evolving learner needs and relevant to real communicative demands (Ellis, 2017a, 2017b; East, 2021a, 2021b).

Needs analysis questionnaire

A structured needs analysis questionnaire was developed to capture learners' task-related needs, integrating both general and task-specific elements. Data were collected via Google Forms, allowing efficient distribution and systematic analysis.

The first part elicited learners' perceptions of teacher competencies and pedagogical priorities, asking which skills are most essential for English language teachers, which aspects of language learning need greater emphasis, and what challenges learners face (Brown, 1995; Richards, 2001). The second part gathered feedback on classroom experiences, instructional preferences, and perceived barriers, including preferred teaching methods (interactive activities, lectures, collaborative tasks) and types of instructor support (Ellis, 2017a, 2017b).

Analysis identified recurring themes and priority areas. For instance, frequent difficulties in oral communication or listening comprehension indicated a need to enhance teacher competencies and incorporate more communicative strategies (Nunan, 2004a, 2004b). Task-based language teaching principles were integrated by including items on learners' confidence and needs in performing real-world tasks, such as participating in group discussions, writing professional emails, or delivering presentations (Willis & Willis, 2007; Ellis, 2003a, 2003b).

Grounding the needs analysis in authentic task performance provided actionable data to design a learner-centered, task-aligned curriculum and informed teacher training to better support learners' academic and professional goals.

Research Procedure

Quantitative data were collected via Google Forms using an online questionnaire developed within the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) Project No. 4.2.4.2/1/24/I/001, "Support for Adult Education Based on Individual Needs" in Latvia. The task-based needs analysis assessed learners' needs and explored professional competences for effective online English language teaching.

The questionnaire, developed and piloted between July and September 2024, included 27 statements addressing three competence areas: the concept of the “ideal digital teacher,” availability and flexibility, and empathy and understanding, based on the Latvian Teaching Profession Standards (2020) and Guidelines for On-site, Blended, and Remote Learning (2021). Four items were selected for detailed analysis.

A total of 200 participants from Latvia (65% women, 35% men; mean age = 37) with diverse academic backgrounds were recruited via purposive sampling to ensure demographic and professional representation. The survey was available from January 2 to January 31, 2025. Data were analyzed in Microsoft Excel using descriptive statistics (mean, median, standard deviation, skewness, kurtosis) and reliability analysis via Cronbach’s alpha, which indicated acceptable to good internal consistency: clear communication ($\alpha = .82$), flexible scheduling ($\alpha = .76$), and empathy and understanding ($\alpha = .79$). Ninety-five percent confidence intervals were computed; for example, empathy and understanding had a mean of 4.73 (95% CI [4.50, 4.96]), indicating a narrow range despite the sample size.

Participants rated the key variables of effective educators as follows: clear communication (mean = 4.46), flexible scheduling (mean = 4.46), and empathy and understanding (mean = 4.73). Ethical standards, including GDPR compliance, were strictly observed. These results provide preliminary insights, and further research with a larger, more diverse sample is recommended to enhance generalizability.

Focus group participant discussion

A focus group discussion was conducted between October 20 and November 20, 2024, to explore perspectives on developing educator competences for future teachers. The group included a practicing teacher and adult learners from a digital classroom, referred to as Teacher (T) and Participant (P) to maintain confidentiality.

Participants were selected via convenience sampling from English language improvement courses within the “*Support for Adult Education Based on Individual Needs*” project in Latvia. This ensured a diverse sample of individuals actively engaged in enhancing their English proficiency. The discussion was moderated by the author, fostering an open environment for exchanging ideas.

At the outset, participants received a concise definition of teacher competence and were presented with results from the task-based needs analysis questionnaire. This grounded the discussion in empirical data, enabling participants to draw on their professional experience, learning history, and observations to provide nuanced perspectives on educator competences within teacher education programs.

The 90-minute online session, conducted in English, was transcribed, summarized, and analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase approach. This method identified recurring patterns and divergent viewpoints, allowing comprehensive interpretation of participant perspectives. Ethical standards were rigorously observed, with full adherence to GDPR throughout the process.

Results

This chapter presents the findings of the study, focusing on learners’ perceptions of the essential qualities of an ideal online language teacher. The analysis is based on data collected through a task-based needs analysis questionnaire and subsequent focus group discussions. Descriptive statistics, including mean (M), median (Mdn), standard deviation (SD), skewness (Skew), and kurtosis (Kurt), were employed to identify prevailing trends, while correlations between study variables were examined to explore relationships among learners’ preferences.

The internal consistency of the measured variables was evaluated using Cronbach’s alpha, and Pearson correlation matrices were applied to investigate the relationships among key teacher qualities. The results are structured according to the research questions, emphasizing the most valued characteristics, teacher availability, and the role of feedback and empathy in supporting task-based online English language learning.

Survey Analysis: Key Qualities of an Ideal Online Teacher

Research Question 1: What characteristics do learners consider essential for an ideal digital teacher, based on their task-related needs?

Learners’ perceptions of the essential qualities of an ideal online English language teacher were examined through the survey, with descriptive statistics applied to highlight prevailing trends and preferences. The analysis revealed some variability in responses; however, one characteristic stood out prominently: “a good communicator who explains clearly,” which was identified by 45.5% of participants. This finding underscores the importance learners place on clarity, structured explanations, and the ability to convey complex ideas effectively in an online learning environment.

Overall, the results indicate that effective communication is regarded as a core attribute for online educators, serving as a foundational quality that supports student engagement, comprehension, and successful completion of task-based activities. The table below presents the descriptive statistics and correlations for learners’ responses regarding the essential characteristics of an ideal online English teacher in online English language acquisition.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables (Clear Communication as an Essential Characteristic of an Ideal Online Teacher in Online English Language Learning)

Variable	M	Mdn	SD	Skew	Kurt
Clear Communication	4.46	4.00	0.50	0.20	-1.96

Note. The Table 1 represents responses to RQ1 regarding clear communication in online English language acquisition.

M = Mean; Mdn = Median; SD = Standard deviation; Skew = Skewness; Kurt = Kurtosis.

These results indicate that while a range of qualities was acknowledged, certain traits, particularly clear communication, stood out as significantly more important to learners. The positive skewness of the data reflects a concentration of responses around this dominant preference, suggesting a strong collective perception of what constitutes effective online teaching.

Overall, the analysis highlights essential expectations towards online educators, emphasizing that learners regard effective, understandable communication as a cornerstone of professional competence in online teaching environments. These insights can inform teacher training, curriculum design, and ongoing professional development in online education contexts.

Survey Analysis: Ideal Online English Teacher Availability

Research Question 2: According to learners, what is the optimal availability for an online English teacher to support task-based learning?

Learners’ perceptions of teacher availability were examined through the survey, with descriptive statistics applied to identify prevailing trends. The analysis revealed a notable degree of variability in responses; however, the most frequently selected characteristic, representing the mode, was “flexible schedule depending on student needs,” chosen by 45.5% of respondents ($n = 200, f = 91$). This result underscores the importance learners place on adaptability in scheduling, suggesting that the ability of an online teacher to adjust their availability to meet individual student needs is a key factor in supporting effective task-based learning.

These findings highlight that, alongside clear communication, flexibility in teacher availability is considered an essential quality for educators in digital learning environments. Although the sample size is relatively small, the results provide insight into learners’ priorities, indicating that responsiveness and accessibility play a critical role in fostering engagement and facilitating successful online learning experiences. The following Table 2 represents the descriptive statistics and correlations for learners’ responses regarding the preferred availability of an online English teacher.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables (Flexible Scheduling as an Essential Characteristic of an Ideal Online Teacher)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Skew</i>	<i>Kurt</i>
Flexible Scheduling	4.46	4.00	0.50	0.20	−1.96

Note. The Table 2 represents responses to RQ2 regarding flexible scheduling in online English language acquisition.

M = Mean; *Mdn* = Median; *SD* = Standard deviation; *Skew* = Skewness; *Kurt* = Kurtosis.

While there was some variability in the distribution of responses, distinct patterns emerged regarding preferred teacher availability. This variability underscores the critical role of “flexibility” and “responsiveness” in promoting a supportive and effective virtual learning environment. These results reinforce students’ perception that teachers’ availability should align with diverse schedules and learning requirements.

Survey Analysis: Qualities of an Online Teacher to Support Task-Oriented Goals

Research Question 3: *How do learners evaluate the importance of an online teacher’s feedback and guidance in supporting the successful completion of task-oriented activities?*

A survey was conducted to evaluate the importance of an online teacher’s “empathy” and “understanding” in supporting task-oriented learning within virtual environments. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods to assess the extent to which learners value these qualities.

The results indicate a strong preference for empathy and understanding, with 72.7% of respondents rating these qualities as “very important,” and 27.3% considering them “important.” Notably, no respondents selected neutral or negative responses, emphasizing the widespread recognition of empathy and understanding as critical variables for effective online teaching. The following Table 3 represents the descriptive statistics and correlations for learners’ responses regarding the preferred qualities of an online English teacher.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables (Empathy and Understanding in Online English Language Acquisition)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Skew</i>	<i>Kurt</i>
Empathy and Understanding	4.73	5.00	0.43	−1.15	−0.67

Note. The Table 3 represents responses to RQ3 regarding empathy and understanding in online English language acquisition.

M = Mean; *Mdn* = Median; *SD* = Standard deviation; *Skew* = Skewness; *Kurt* = Kurtosis.

These findings underline the critical role of empathy and understanding in fostering student engagement, motivation, and overall satisfaction in online education. The strong preference for these qualities emphasizes that learners highly value teachers who demonstrate emotional intelligence and are attuned to their needs and concerns in a virtual setting.

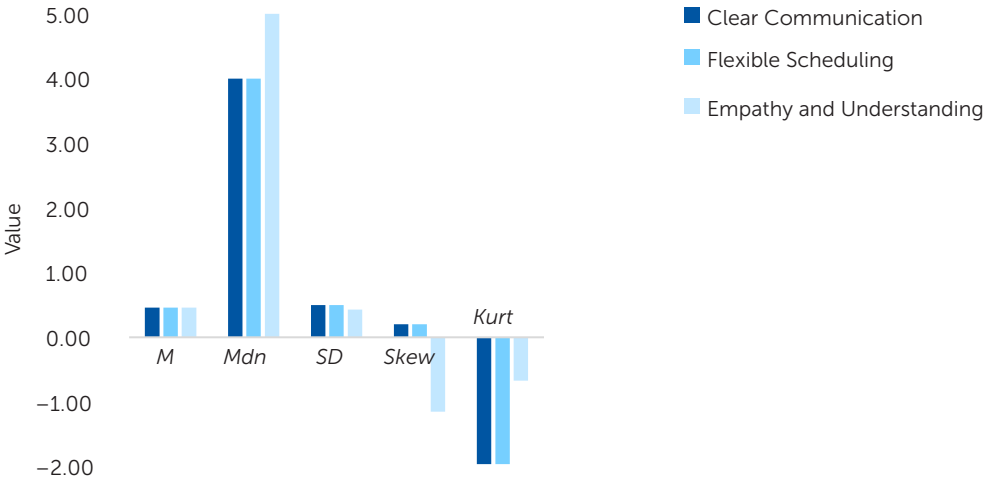


Figure 1 Statistical Summary of Study Variables

Note. A quantitative analysis was conducted to evaluate three key study variables: “clear communication”, “flexible scheduling”, and “empathy and understanding”.

The visual representation of statistical summary and correlations for study variables is presented in Figure 1, illustrating the *M* (mean), *Mdn* (median), *SD* (standard deviation), *Skew* (skewness), and *K* (kurtosis) for each variable.

The mean scores for “clear communication” and “flexible scheduling” were both 4.46, while “empathy and understanding” received a higher mean of 4.73, indicating stronger positive perception. Median values mirrored this pattern (4.0 for communication and scheduling, 5.0 for empathy), reflecting clustering at the highest level for empathy. Standard deviations were low (0.43–0.50), with empathy showing the least variability (0.43). Skewness was near zero for communication and scheduling, whereas empathy exhibited negative skew (–1.15), showing concentration at the upper end. Kurtosis values were negative for all variables (–1.96 for communication and scheduling, –0.67 for empathy), suggesting relatively flat distributions. Overall, “empathy and understanding” emerged as the most valued and consistently endorsed quality. Table 1 presents a detailed overview of these correlations (see Table 1).

Focus group participant discussion

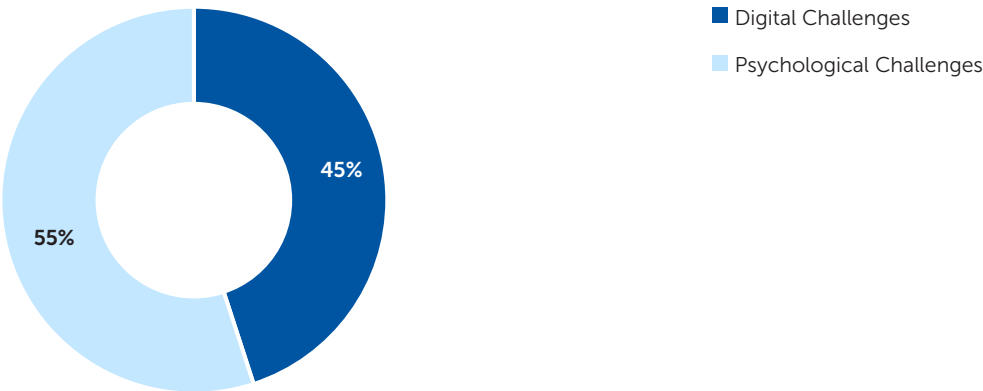


Figure 2 Challenges Faced by Future Teachers Percentage of respondents reporting digital and psychological challenges

Note. Data are based on responses from 200 adult participants in online English courses.

Focus group analysis identified two main categories of challenges to developing future teachers’ professional competence: digital and psychological. About 45% of respondents reported digital barriers, such as limited access to technology, insufficient training, and rapid technological change, while 55% emphasized psychological challenges, including stress, resistance to new technologies, and the mental demands of adapting to digital teaching. Overall, psychological challenges were slightly more prevalent.

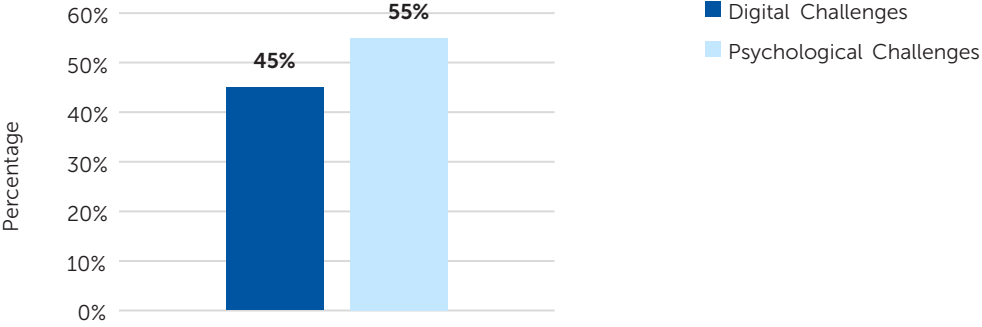


Figure 3 Challenges Faced by Future Teachers. Percentage of respondents reporting digital and psychological challenges

Note. Data from 200 adult online English learners indicated two main challenges to enhancing future teachers’ professional competence: digital (45%) and psychological (55%), with psychological challenges reported slightly more frequently.

Building on the identification of digital and psychological challenges, Table 4 presents the correlations between these factors in online English language acquisition.

Table 4 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables (for Psychological and Digital Challenges)

Variable	Psychological Challenges	Digital Challenges
Value (%)	55	45
<i>M</i>	50.0	50.0
<i>Mdn</i>	50.0	50.0
<i>SD</i>	7.07	7.07
<i>Skew</i>	0.0	0.0
<i>Kurt</i>	–2.0	–2.0

Note. The Table 4 represents correlations for psychological and digital challenges in online English language acquisition.

M = Mean; *Mdn* = Median; *SD* = Standard deviation; *Skew* = Skewness; *Kurt* = Kurtosis.

Descriptive statistics reveal a mean and median of 50%, indicating a balanced distribution between the two challenge types. The standard deviation of 7.07 reflects moderate variability, while a skewness of 0.0 shows symmetry in responses. Kurtosis at –2.0 suggests a relatively flat distribution, typical for data with only two categories. Although both digital and psychological factors were noted, participants particularly emphasized psychological challenges as influencing the development of professional competence. To further explore relationships among the identified teacher qualities, a Pearson correlation matrix was generated.

Table 5 Correlations between study variables

Variable 1	Variable 2	<i>r</i>
Clear communication	Flexible scheduling	0.78
Clear communication	Empathy and understanding	0.65
Flexible scheduling	Empathy and understanding	0.60

Note. *r* = correlation coefficient between the corresponding variables. All correlations are significant at $p < .01$.

The analysis revealed strong positive correlations between “clear communication” and “flexible scheduling” ($r = 0.78$), and moderate to strong correlations between “clear communication” and “empathy and understanding” ($r = 0.65$), as well as between “flexible scheduling” and “empathy and understanding” ($r = 0.60$) (Kaiser & Rice, 1974). These results reinforce the internal consistency and conceptual coherence of the study variables.

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed strong, significant positive relationships among the key variables: “clear communication” and “flexible scheduling” ($r = 0.78$), with moderate to strong correlations between each of these and “empathy and understanding” ($r = 0.65$ and $r = 0.60$, respectively; $p < .01$). These results confirm the conceptual coherence of the measurement framework and the meaningful interrelation of the study variables.

Overall, survey results revealed three competences most valued by learners: clear communication, flexible scheduling, and empathy and understanding. Communication clarity was regarded as a foundation for effective learning, while flexibility in scheduling reflected the need for adaptable teacher availability in digital contexts. Most notably, empathy emerged as the highest-rated competence, underscoring the role of socio-emotional support in sustaining motivation and engagement.

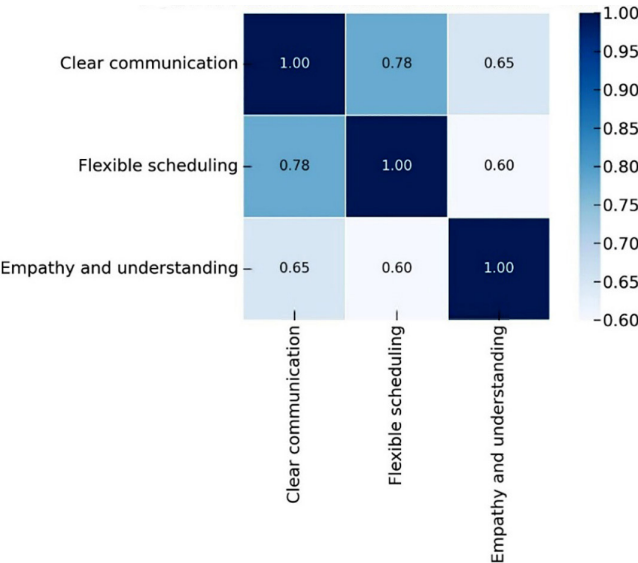


Figure 4 Pearson correlation matrix among study variables and correlations

Note. All correlations are significant at $p < .01$.

Focus group discussions reinforced these findings, highlighting that learners value not only digital proficiency but also teachers' ability to respond to psychological challenges, such as stress and adaptation to new technologies. Overall, the results suggest that professional development for online teachers must integrate technical, pedagogical, and emotional competences in a coherent framework.

Discussion

The present study extends previous research on task-based language teaching by highlighting learners' perspectives on teacher professionalism in digital contexts. While prior studies have emphasized digital competence and task design (Ellis, 2021; Long, 2015), the findings of this study reveal that relational competences – particularly empathy and flexible scheduling – are equally essential for effective online teaching. This suggests that teacher training programs should integrate not only technical and methodological skills, but also socio-emotional development and psychological resilience. Such emphasis on empathy as a measurable competence is a novel contribution to the field, bridging the gap between task-based pedagogy and emotional (affective) dimensions of online teaching.

This research contributes to the growing body of research on task-based language teaching in digital environments by foregrounding learners' perspectives on teacher professionalism. While prior work has largely emphasized technical and methodological competences (Ellis, 2021; Long, 2015), findings from this study demonstrate that relational competences – empathy, flexibility, and clarity – are equally central to effective online teaching.

The task-based needs analysis examined learners' perspectives on teacher professionalism in online English language learning, focusing on task-based approaches and socio-emotional online environments. No rotation matrix was applied, as the study centered on the reliability and correlations of three variables: “clear communication,” “flexible scheduling,” and “empathy and understanding.” Cronbach's alpha of 0.87 indicated high internal consistency, confirming that these variables reliably measure a common construct.

“Empathy and understanding” emerged as the most valued attribute ($M = 4.73$), highlighting the importance of emotional intelligence in effective online teaching. “Clear communication” and “flexible scheduling” were rated similarly, reflecting the secondary but still significant role of clarity and flexibility. Pearson correlations showed strong links between “clear communication” and “flexible scheduling” ($r = 0.78$) and moderate correlations with empathy ($r = 0.65$ and $r = 0.60$), supporting the conceptual coherence of the framework. Empathy, in particular, emerged as the most highly valued competence, surpassing digital and organizational skills. This underscores that task completion in online settings depends not only on instructional design but also on teachers' ability to foster trust, reduce anxiety, and maintain motivation. Another contribution lies in identifying the interrelation between competences: communication clarity, scheduling flexibility, and empathy are not isolated skills but mutually reinforcing qualities that shape

the learner experience. This insight suggests that teacher training should adopt a holistic approach, addressing both technical/digital competences and psychological resilience.

Finally, the study highlights practical implications for curriculum design and teacher development programs: incorporating empathy as a measurable competence, designing flexible interaction models, and balancing digital literacy with socio-emotional training. Together, these findings provide a methodological framework that bridges theory and practice in socio-emotional, digitally mediated ESL classrooms.

Conclusions

This study examined the professional competences of online language teachers from the perspective of adult learners, using a task-based needs analysis grounded in the Latvian Teacher Professional Standards (Skolotāja profesijas standarts, 2020). Three research questions guided the investigation: essential teacher characteristics, optimal availability, and the role of feedback in task-based learning.

Findings indicate that learners prioritize empathy and understanding ($M = 4.73$), highlighting the centrality of emotional intelligence in online teaching. Clear communication and flexible scheduling (both $M = 4.46$) were also highly valued, emphasizing the importance of clarity, structure, and adaptability. Correlation analyses showed strong positive relationships among these competences, suggesting that they are interrelated and collectively contribute to effective online teaching.

Focus group data revealed that psychological challenges such as fostering empathy, managing engagement, and supporting individual needs were slightly more prominent than digital barriers, underscoring the importance of professional development addressing both technical skills and emotional resilience.

Overall, an ideal online teacher combines pedagogical expertise, emotional intelligence, and flexible organization to support task-oriented learning. Practical implications include enhancing communication clarity, offering adaptable schedules, and demonstrating empathy to improve learner satisfaction and engagement.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed: all participants provided informed consent, and data were anonymized and used solely for research purposes, ensuring compliance with institutional ethical guidelines.

The study has some limitations, including a relatively small and demographically homogeneous sample, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future research should involve larger and more diverse populations and examine how teacher competences impact measurable learner outcomes in online environments.

REFERENCES

- Abuhassna, H., & Alnawajha, S. (2023). The Transactional Distance Theory and Distance Learning Contexts. *Encyclopedia of Education Sciences*, 13(2), 112–120. <https://encyclopedia.pub/entry/41053>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

- Brown, J. D. (2016). *Introducing needs analysis and English for specific purposes*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315668531>
- Brown, J. D. (1995). *The elements of language curriculum: A systematic approach to program development*. Heinle & Heinle.
- Cronbach, L. J. (1951). Coefficient alpha and the internal structure of tests. *Psychometrika*, 16(3), 297–334. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02310555>
- Dhawan, S. (2020). Online learning: A panacea in the time of COVID-19 crisis. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 49(1), 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047239520934018>
- Doughty, C., & Williams, J. (2020). *Focus on form in classroom second language acquisition*. Cambridge University Press.
- Doughty, C., & Williams, J. (Eds.). (1998). *Focus on form in classroom second language acquisition*. Cambridge University Press.
- East, M. (2021a). *Task-based language teaching and curriculum development*. Language Teaching Press.
- East, M. (2021b). *Foundations for task-based language teaching*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429266343>
- Ellis, R. (2021a). *Task-based language teaching: A systematic review of research and applications*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ellis, R. (2021b). Task-based language teaching in the digital era: Innovations and applications. *Language Teaching Research*, 25(4), 523–542. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13621688211012345>
- Ellis, R. (2018). *Reflections on task-based language teaching*. Multilingual Matters.
- Ellis, R. (2017a). *Understanding second language acquisition* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. (2017b). Task-based language teaching: Sorting out the misunderstandings. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 27(2), 386–404. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijal.12218>
- Ellis, R. (2009). Task-based language teaching: Sorting out the misunderstandings. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 19(3), 221–246. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1473-4192.2009.00231.x>
- Ellis, R. (2003a). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. (2003b). Task-based language teaching: Sorting out the misunderstandings. *ELT Journal*, 57(4), 319–326. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/57.4.319>
- Endeli, E., & Efendi, H. (2025). The relationship between digital literacy and emotional intelligence on vocational high school students' work readiness. *Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan IPA*, 11(4), 10628. <https://doi.org/10.29303/jppipa.v11i4.10628>
- European Social Fund Plus Project No. 4.2.4.2/1/24/I/001. (n. d.). *Support for adult education based on individual needs. European Union Funded Report*. Retrieved from <http://www.esf.gov.lv>
- García Botero, N., & Guimón, S. (2022). Task-based language teaching in multilingual communities: Interaction and equity. *Modern Language Journal*, 106(3), 678–695. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12856>
- General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). (2016). Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data. *Official Journal of the European Union*, L119, 1–88. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2016/679/oj>
- Hinton, C., & Nuttall, D. (2011). Implementing professional development for teachers in a changing educational environment. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 2(4), 25–33. Retrieved from <https://www.iiste.org>
- Hinton, P. R., Brownlow, C., McMurray, I., & Cozens, B. (2011). *SPSS Explained. Using SPSS to Analyse Questionnaires: Reliability* (pp. 355–365). London, UK: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Kaiser, H. F., & Rice, J. (1974). Little Jiffy, Mark IV. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 34(1), 111–117. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001316447403400115>

- Karaoglan-Yilmaz, F. G., Zhang, K., Ustun, A. B., & Yilmaz, R. (2022). Transactional distance perceptions, student engagement, and course satisfaction in flipped learning: A correlational study. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 32(2), 447–462. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2022.2044884>
- Kim, J., & Lee, H. (2020). Scaffolding task sequences to enhance engagement in online task-based language learning: A meta-analysis. *TESOL Quarterly*, 54(2), 357–380. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.514>
- Koran, A., & Sarnou, H. (2024). Salmon's five-stage model and E-Portfolios: A pathway to intercultural communication skills in virtual learning during COVID-19. *South Florida Journal of Development*, 5(10), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.46932/sfjdv5n10-047>
- Li, X., & Zhang, Y. (2023). Inclusion through task-based learning: Autonomy-oriented design in hybrid language classrooms. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 36(5), 1430–1450. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2023.1878765>
- Long, M. H. (2021). *Focus on form in task-based language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nunn, M. H. (2015). *Second language acquisition and task-based language teaching*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Long, M. H. (2015b). *Second language acquisition and task-based language teaching*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315830457>
- Long, M. H. (2005). *Second language needs analysis*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511667299>
- Long, M. H. (2000). Focus on form in task-based language teaching. *Language Policy*, 1(1), 27–52. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1018326504277>
- Martin, F., Sun, T., & Westine, C. D. (2020). A systematic review of research on online teaching and learning from 2009 to 2018. *Computers & Education*, 159, Article 104009. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2020.104009>
- Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia. (2020). *Skolotāja profesijas standarts [Teacher professional standard]*. Retrieved from <http://www.izm.gov.lv>
- Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia. (2021). *Vadlīnijas klātienēs, kombinētu un attālinātu mācību īstenošanai [Guidelines for the implementation of on-site, blended, and remote learning]*. Retrieved from <http://www.izm.gov.lv>
- Moore, M. G. (1993). *Distance education: A systems view*. Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Morong, G., & DesBiens, D. (2017). Culturally responsive online design: Learning at intercultural intersections. *Journal of Distance Education*, 31(1), 1–15. <https://www.jofde.ca/index.php/jde/article/view/1352>
- Nunan, D. (2004a). *Task-based language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nunan, D. (2004b). *Task-based language teaching*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511667336>
- Nunan, D. (1989). *Designing tasks for the communicative classroom*. Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J. C. (2001). *Curriculum development in language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
- Salmon, G. (2013). *E-tivities: The key to active online learning* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Salmon, G. (2000). *E-moderating: The key to teaching and learning online*. Routledge.
- Schoonenboom, J., & Johnson, R. B. (2017). How to construct a mixed methods research design. *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 69(Suppl 2), 107–131. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11577-017-0454-1>
- Shi, Q., Xu, X., Zhang, Y., & Hu, B. (2025). Research on psychological resilience, digital competence, and self-efficacy in online TCFL teachers. *Behavioral Sciences*, 15(3), 366. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs15030366>
- Skehan, P. (1998). *A cognitive approach to language learning*. Oxford University Press.

- Skolotāja profesijas standarts. (2020). *Profesiju standarti. [Teacher professional standard]*. Latvijas Republikas Izglītības un zinātnes ministrija. <https://www.likumi.lv/ta/id/316988-skolotaja-profesijas-standarts>
- Tunjera, N. (2023). Adopting WhatsApp to Reduce Transactional Distance During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *European Journal of Education and Learning*, 5(1), 1–10. <https://academic-publishing.org/index.php/ejel/article/view/2752>.
- Willis, J., & Willis, D. (2007). *Doing task-based teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- Yilmaz, R., & Karaoglan Yilmaz, F. G. (2019). Assigned roles as a structuring tool in online discussion groups: Comparison of transactional distance and knowledge sharing behaviors. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, 57(5), 1303–1325. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0735633118786855>.
- Yilmaz, R., & Keser, H. (2017). The impact of interactive environment and metacognitive support on academic achievement and transactional distance in online learning. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, 55(1), 95–122. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0735633116656453>.