

Is Digital Competence Enough? Rethinking Teaching Effectiveness in Vietnamese EFL Higher Education

Nhung Thuy Thi Le¹, Huynh Manh Bui²

¹Faculty of Foreign Languages, Ho Chi Minh University of Banking, Vietnam

E-mail: nhunglth@hub.edu.vn

Orcid id# 0000-0002-2492-7658

²Faculty of Foreign Languages, Ho Chi Minh University of Banking, Vietnam

E-mail: huynhbui1105@gmail.com

Orcid id# 0009-0001-5352-7872

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ABSTRACT:

The increasing integration of digital technologies in higher education has raised expectations for language teachers to develop strong digital competence to support technology-enhanced learning environments. However, empirical evidence regarding whether teachers' digital competence contributes to teaching effectiveness remains limited. This study therefore examined the relationship between EFL teachers' digital competence and their teaching effectiveness. A quantitative correlational research design was employed. Data were collected from 879 EFL lecturers working in Vietnam. Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between the two constructs. The findings indicated that lecturers reported relatively high levels of both digital competence and teaching effectiveness across most dimensions. However, the correlation analysis revealed that digital competence did not have a significant relationship with teaching effectiveness. These findings suggest that digital competence alone may not necessarily lead to improved teaching performance. To explain this result, the study proposes an interpretive perspective in which the influence of digital competence operates indirectly through the pedagogical integration of digital technologies, while institutional factors such as technological infrastructure, professional development opportunities, and technical support also shape instructional effectiveness. The study highlights the complex and context-dependent nature of technology integration in EFL higher education.

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Keywords: Digital competence, Teaching effectiveness, EFL lecturers, Technology integration, Vietnamese higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have increasingly transformed higher education and language learning environments. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, teachers are now expected to integrate digital technologies into lesson design, classroom interaction, assessment, and professional communication (Consoli et al., 2024). Consequently, digital competence has become an essential competency for language teachers in contemporary education.

Digital competence generally refers to teachers' ability to use digital technologies in confident, critical, and pedagogically meaningful ways (Redecker, 2017). Among the most widely adopted frameworks, DigCompEdu conceptualizes teachers' digital competence across domains such as professional engagement, digital resources, teaching and learning, and assessment. To better address contextual influences, Alarcón et al. (2020) extended this framework by incorporating dimensions related to digital environment and extrinsic digital engagement, highlighting the importance of technological infrastructure and institutional support.

The present study is informed by Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1997) and the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). These perspectives suggest that effective technology integration depends not only on teachers' confidence in using digital technologies but also on their ability to combine technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge meaningfully in instructional practices.

Teaching effectiveness is widely recognized as a key factor influencing students' learning outcomes and engagement (Hu & Xiao, 2025). Previous research conceptualizes teaching effectiveness as a multidimensional construct involving lesson planning, classroom management, subject matter knowledge, teacher characteristics, and interpersonal relationships with students (Prakash et al., 2020). In digitalized learning environments, teachers' digital competence may therefore contribute to instructional effectiveness.

Despite growing attention to teachers' digital competence, empirical evidence regarding its relationship with teaching effectiveness remains limited. Previous studies have mainly focused on teachers' digital readiness, self-efficacy, and technology integration practices (Rahimi, 2024; Rezai et al., 2024; Qian & Yan, 2026). While some studies suggest that digital competence supports instructional innovation (Basilotta et al., 2022; Çemçem et al., 2025), others argue that technological competence alone does not necessarily improve teaching outcomes unless technologies are pedagogically integrated into classroom practices (Consoli et al., 2024).

In Vietnam, the rapid digital transformation of higher education following the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the use of online teaching platforms and digital learning resources. Although recent studies have examined Vietnamese EFL teachers' digital competence (Do & Nguyen, 2025; Hoang, 2024), empirical research investigating its relationship with teaching effectiveness remains relatively limited. Therefore, the present study aims to examine the potential relationship between EFL teachers' digital competence and their teaching effectiveness among university lecturers in Vietnam. Specifically, the study addresses the following research question:

What is the correlation between EFL teachers' digital competence and their teaching effectiveness?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative correlational research design to examine the relationship between EFL teachers' digital competence and their teaching effectiveness. A quantitative approach is appropriate for investigating relationships among variables and generating empirical evidence through statistical analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Within this design, the study aimed to determine whether teachers' levels of digital competence are associated with different dimensions of teaching effectiveness. The data were collected using structured questionnaires and analyzed using statistical techniques to identify the strength and

direction of the relationship between the two constructs.

Research Setting And Participants

The study was conducted at Vietnamese higher education institutions that integrate digital technologies into English language teaching. The participants were 879 EFL lecturers from several public and private universities in Vietnam. Convenience sampling was employed to recruit participants through professional networks and institutional contacts. The participants varied in age, gender, academic qualifications, and teaching experience. Most lecturers were between 30 and 40 years old, female, and held a master's degree, while a smaller proportion possessed doctoral qualifications. In terms of teaching experience, the majority had more than five years of experience teaching in higher education. All participants were teaching English courses at the tertiary level at the time of data collection.

INSTRUMENT

Data were collected using a questionnaire consisting of two sections. The first section gathered demographic information, including age, gender, academic qualification, teaching experience, and institution type. The second section included two established scales measuring EFL teachers' digital competence and teaching effectiveness, using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). EFL teachers' digital competence was measured using a scale adapted from Alarcón et al. (2020), covering eight dimensions related to teachers' use of digital technologies in professional and instructional practices. The scale demonstrated high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$). Teaching effectiveness was measured using the Teacher Effectiveness Scale developed by Prakash et al. (2020), which includes five dimensions of instructional performance. The reliability coefficient of the scale was .85. The questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese and reviewed by two applied linguistics lecturers to ensure linguistic accuracy and clarity before the pilot study.

DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

Prior to the main data collection, the questionnaire was pilot tested with a small group of EFL teachers to ensure the clarity and reliability of the survey items. Minor revisions were subsequently made based on participants' feedback. For the main study, the questionnaire was distributed online using Google Forms, and the survey link was shared through professional networks and institutional contacts. Participation in the study was voluntary, and all respondents were informed about the purpose of the study before completing the questionnaire. The questionnaire took approximately 6–7 minutes to complete. To ensure ethical research practices, participants' anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, and only completed questionnaires were included in the final dataset for analysis. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS version 27. First, internal consistency reliability of the measurement scales was examined using Cronbach's alpha coefficients to ensure acceptable reliability of the constructs. Second, descriptive statistics, including mean scores and standard deviations, were calculated to examine the overall levels of EFL teachers' digital competence and teaching effectiveness. Prior to conducting correlation analysis, the dataset was screened to ensure that the assumptions of Pearson product-moment correlation, including normality and linearity, were satisfied. Finally, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the strength and direction of the relationship between EFL teachers' digital competence and their teaching effectiveness.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics of EFL Teachers' Digital Competence and Teaching Effectiveness

The descriptive statistics indicated that the participating EFL lecturers reported relatively high levels of digital competence across most dimensions. Among the eight dimensions, Teaching and Learning received the highest mean score ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.45$), followed by Professional Engagement ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.53$) and Assessment ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.40$). By contrast, lower mean scores were observed for Facilitating Learners'

Digital Competence, Digital Environment (M = 3.15, SD = 0.71), and Extrinsic Digital Engagement (M = 3.19, SD = 0.53), suggesting limitations related to supporting students’ digital competence and institutional technological conditions.

Similarly, the results showed that the lecturers perceived their teaching effectiveness at relatively high levels across all five dimensions. Knowledge of Subject Matter and its Delivery received the highest mean score (M = 4.65, SD = 0.42), followed by Classroom Management (M = 4.36, SD = 0.23) and Preparation for Teaching and Planning (M = 4.25, SD = 0.27). Lower mean scores were reported for Teacher Characteristics (M = 4.14, SD = 0.31) and Interpersonal Relations (M = 4.02, SD = 0.35). Overall, the findings suggest that the participating lecturers perceived themselves as highly competent in both digital and instructional domains

The Relationship Between EFL Teachers’ Digital Competence And Their Teaching Effectiveness

Pearson product–moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between EFL teachers’ digital competence and their teaching effectiveness. As shown in Table 4, all correlation coefficients between the dimensions of digital competence and teaching effectiveness were weak and statistically non-significant ($p > .05$). The findings therefore indicate that EFL teachers’ digital competence was not significantly associated with their teaching effectiveness in this study.

Table 4. Correlation between EFL Teachers’ Digital Competence and Teaching Effectiveness

	P E	D R	T L	A S	E L	FL DC	D E	E D
PT P	.0 73	.0 45	.0 62	.0 54	.0 33	.028	.0 60	.04 5
C M	-.0 56	.0 36	-.0 43	.0 32	.0 51	.046	.0 49	.03 6
KS M	.0 69	-.0 41	-.0 52	.0 37	.0 43	.069	-.0 48	.02 1

TC	-	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	.041	.0	.04
	33	57	46	52	61			39	9
IR	.0	.0	.0	.0	-			-	.05
	46	61	55	45	.0	.058		.0	2
					31			27	

Note: All correlations are non-significant ($p > .05$).

Note. PE = Professional Engagement; DR = Digital Resources; TL = Teaching and Learning; A = Assessment; EL = Empowering Learners; FLDC = Facilitating Learners’ Digital Competence; DE = Digital Environment; EDE = Extrinsic Digital Engagement; PTP = Preparation for Teaching and Planning; CM = Classroom Management; KSM = Knowledge of Subject Matter; TC = Teacher Characteristics; IR = Interpersonal Relations. All correlations were non-significant ($p > .05$).

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the relationship between EFL teachers’ digital competence and their teaching effectiveness in Vietnamese higher education. The findings revealed that the participating lecturers reported relatively high levels of both digital competence and teaching effectiveness. In particular, lecturers demonstrated stronger competence in teaching and learning, professional engagement, and assessment, suggesting that digital technologies have become increasingly integrated into instructional and professional practices in higher education. However, lower scores in facilitating learners’ digital competence and institutional support dimensions indicate that teachers may still face challenges in fostering students’ digital learning abilities and accessing sufficient technological support.

More importantly, the correlation analysis showed that digital competence was not significantly associated with teaching effectiveness. This finding suggests that possessing digital competence alone may not necessarily translate into improved instructional effectiveness. One possible explanation is that digital competence may function as a supporting condition rather than a direct determinant of effective teaching. Although

teachers may be capable of using digital technologies, effective instruction also requires pedagogical integration, instructional design, and meaningful classroom interaction. This interpretation is consistent with the TPACK framework (Dutta, 2025; Mishra & Koehler, 2006), which emphasizes that technology becomes educationally effective only when combined with pedagogical and content knowledge.

The findings partly diverge from previous studies suggesting that digital competence supports instructional innovation and technology-enhanced teaching practices (Basilotta et al., 2022; Luceño & Ocampo, 2026; Rezai et al., 2024). However, the results are consistent with research arguing that technological competence alone does not automatically improve teaching outcomes unless digital technologies are pedagogically integrated into classroom practices (Consoli et al., 2024; Dolezal et al., 2025). In the Vietnamese higher education context, digital technologies may often be used primarily for administrative and instructional support purposes rather than for transforming pedagogical practices, which may help explain the weak relationship identified in this study.

The study contributes to the literature by extending existing discussions on digital competence beyond the assumption that technological proficiency directly leads to teaching effectiveness. Instead, the findings highlight the context-dependent and pedagogically mediated nature of technology integration in EFL higher education. The study therefore suggests that future research should further examine the mediating roles of pedagogical integration, institutional support, and instructional practices in the relationship between teachers' digital competence and teaching effectiveness.

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CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between EFL teachers' digital competence and their teaching effectiveness in Vietnamese higher education. Although the participating lecturers reported relatively high levels of both constructs, the findings revealed a weak and statistically non-significant relationship between digital competence and teaching effectiveness. These results suggest that digital competence alone may not directly contribute to improved instructional effectiveness.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied on self-reported questionnaires, which may reflect participants' perceptions rather than their actual teaching practices. Second, the study employed a correlational design, which does not allow causal relationships to be established. In addition, the participants were recruited from universities in southern Vietnam; therefore, the findings may not fully represent other educational contexts.

Future research is recommended to employ mixed-methods or classroom-based approaches to examine how teachers integrate digital technologies into pedagogical practices. Further studies may also investigate the mediating roles of pedagogical integration, institutional support, and instructional design in shaping the effectiveness of technology integration in EFL education.

AUTHOR DECLARATION

The authors confirm that this manuscript is original, has not been published previously, and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. The authors also declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this study.

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