

## **The impact of competency-based teaching according to the preschool study program of public education**

**Silvia Rodríguez Arce**

[silvia.rodriguez.arce@uhispano.ac.cr](mailto:silvia.rodriguez.arce@uhispano.ac.cr)

**Julio César Castro Miranda**

[julio.castro@uh.ac.cr](mailto:julio.castro@uh.ac.cr)

**Mariana Villalobos Ruiz**

[marianavillaru@gmail.com](mailto:marianavillaru@gmail.com)

Universidad Hispanoamericana  
San José, Costa Rica

### **ABSTRACT**

This article exhibits the impact of Competency-Based English Teaching from the perspective of the English by Immersion preschool teachers, in the virtual modality, during the first semester of 2020.

The research problem from which this article draws from is based in the need of preschool education to be renovated regarding the strategies utilized for English teaching. The authors' objective is to present the results of the evaluation performed to determine the impact of Competency-Based Education in the virtual environment of public preschool education.

This assessment was carried out in a micro level, with a qualitative and descriptive approach, in an applied and transversal study. All teachers registered in the English by Immersion program by MEP, who completed a questionnaire, from which was possible to analyze and interpret the data to establish the conclusions presented in this article, were included in the research.

**Keywords:** competency-based teaching; preschool education; virtual education; bilingualism.

## **El impacto de la enseñanza basada en competencias según el programa de estudios preescolar de la educación pública**

### **RESUMEN**

El estudio de la profesión docente y las experiencias que surgen a lo largo de su gran labor en las aulas ha sido un tema de interés para muchos investigadores en ámbito educativo. Esta investigación, no es la excepción, sin embargo, tiene una gran peculiaridad: el estudio y exploración el desempeño de la población docente de inglés por inmersión en Preescolar en el mundo de la educación virtual.

En este escrito se ha dado a conocer el impacto que ha tenido la enseñanza de inglés por competencias basado en la unidad naranja del plan de estudios en preescolar de la Educación Pública Costarricense en la repentina migración a la virtualidad debido a la emergencia mundial por COVID19.

Diferentes autores reconocen que la persona docente de preescolar es un agente indispensable en la educación, y las estrategias que como profesionales crean para enseñar a sus alumnos representan el camino al conocimiento para adquirir las competencias más básicas para la vida. La manera en que las docentes perciban la educación virtual y la situación que han experimentado, influencia en gran medida el proceso pedagógico.

**Palabras clave:** enseñanza por competencias; educación preescolar; educación virtual; bilingüismo.

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Correspondencia: [silvia.rodriguez.arce@uhispano.ac.cr](mailto:silvia.rodriguez.arce@uhispano.ac.cr)

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## INTRODUCTION

This research works with a sample of 30 teachers registered in the Alliance for Bilingualism for preschool Education in Costa Rica. They were exposed to a questionnaire based on the experienced they have been developing during the migration to the new virtual education system according to the competences involved in the preschool curriculum for public education.

Firstly, it is vital and important to define what competency-based teaching is:

Competency-based education has its roots firmly in the Behaviorist tradition popularized in the United States during the 1950s by educators such as Benjamin Bloom. CBE (Commander of the Order of the British Empire) became popular in the United States during the 1970s where it was used in vocational training programs. The approach spread to Europe in the 1980s and by the 1990s, it was being used in Australia to measure professional skills. Throughout its evolution, CBE has been known by a variety of names including performance-based learning, criterion-referenced learning, and capabilities-driven instruction (Bowden, 2004, p. 91).

For this method, Cano (2008) says “it is important to be able to search for the main information at all times, also, to be able to select it from a lot of possibilities, then, be able to process it, treat it, interpret it and appropriate it to generate the necessary knowledge that allows us to solve the situations that arise” (2008, p.2). In this approach it is necessary to look for the key information, in other words, “competencies are neither curricula nor learning objectives... What they do provide is a framework based on performance outcomes around which a curriculum is developed and delivered and against which performance can be measured.”. (Kim, 2015, p. 286). Successful completion of each specific task involves a set of skills and knowledge which must be accurately applied.

Furthermore, there is a theory called “Multiple intelligences” which is very involved in the competency-based learning. In a research Gardner (1994) cited by Cano (2008) states the importance of having multiple intelligences in mind. “In this sense, with competency designs they have a place in non-strictly cognitive intelligence training, such as emotional intelligence, which can help us to respond to a situation efficiently or to adapt to changing realities” (2008, p.3).

The previous information clearly states that the education by competences integrates the multiple intelligences. Cano found that the human intelligence is diverse. It involves different skills including the emotional field to potentiate the different areas of learning. This kind of intelligence which guides people to properly react before any kind of reality.

Gardner wanted to define human potential by going beyond the IQ (intelligence quotient) score. His theory has led to the development of intelligence tests that contain questions for which more than one answer can be correct. This provides an opportunity for the test taker to demonstrate creative thinking. These tests are based on the idea that different types of intelligence can produce different but equally valid answers to the same question. (Chinyi, & Sreenidhi, 2017, p. 2014).

The current preschool curriculum, introduced in 2014, is used in all Costa Rican public preschool institutions in both English and Spanish. The new program was made to fulfill new educational needs which is very paired with the competency- based learning and teaching. “Today's social, cultural, scientific and technological changes have generated different needs and interests in boys and girls, which is why it is necessary to create a new study program that satisfies them and takes into account their potential”. (Ministerio de Educación Pública, 2014, p. 11). For this reason, the research aims to study the teaching of these competencies in the new virtual environment.

The curricular approach of this program represents the theoretical orientation on which pedagogical practice is based. The Preschool Education Study Program based on the Educational Policy Towards the XXI Century, has a constructivist curricular approach. Coll states

This approach is based on renowned researchers who provide valuable contributions, such as: Piaget (cognitive development and human information processing), Ausubel (meaningful learning), Bruner (acquisition of concepts), Vigostky (sociocultural theory of development and zone of near or potential development) and Wallon (socio-affective development), which integrate a series of explanatory and articulated principles that allow diagnosing, establishing and making informed decisions, about teaching and learning that seek to complement the theory with the practice. (1996, p.5)

On the other hand, virtual education has long been criticized by those who consider physical contact necessary to ensure effective learning. However, the advancement of technologies has made possible the barriers to learning in non-face- to-face models.

Distance learning traditionally has focused on nontraditional students, such as full-time workers, military personnel, and nonresidents or individuals in remote regions who are unable to attend classroom lectures. However, distance learning has become an established part of the educational world, with trends pointing to ongoing growth. (Berg, 2016).

It is emphasized that the distance education has been constantly growing so fast, in fact, nowadays distance education is not just for mature students but for any kind of students.

### **PROBLEMATIZATION**

The problem of this research is based on the need for the public English teaching in preschool to be reformed and observed in terms of the strategies used to teach the language. It is proposed that virtually competency-based teaching in preschool can work to eventually teach English in preschool according to the MEP's program contents. In the following paragraphs, there are showed different reasons for which these topics must be formally researched.

Throughout history, education has been formally studied and reformed. This branch of the social sciences, like many professions, have had to adapt to the divergence of technologies, and to the different problems that are manifested in the world.

Previously, it was doubted that education will become virtual and will show quality learning as a result. However, it can be observed how the new generations of children handle technologies better and better, which makes it possible to question whether virtual learning can really be a real problem, or a social advantage. "The purpose of teaching is to promote and improve learning. A multifaceted and fair approach to assess the quality of teaching can identify strengths and weaknesses and allow excellence in teaching to be rewarded or additional training provided when appropriate". (Burce, 2014).

The previous comment shows that in teaching it is intended to identify strengths and weaknesses which is not usually in the traditional methods. As it is known teachers are the center of the process and they just transmit the knowledge. However, the competency-based learning seeks to help the student find the strengths and weaknesses of themselves. In a competency-based curriculum, students are rewarded only for successful completion

of authentic tasks. Ideally, at the beginning of a course, each student is given an initial assessment determining the level of proficiency. Students then proceed to learn the material, at their own pace, getting lots of informational feedback from the teachers. Students know, at every level of their work, where they are and what they need to do to meet the competency standards (Griffith, W; & Lim, H, 2014, p.6)

The foregoing is part of a changing world, in which the student is involved in an educational process as a protagonist. Likewise, this research seeks to study the flexibility that the teacher and the student have had when getting involved in a virtual educational process, based on in the acquisition of competencies of the preschool curriculum. **National Forum on Education Statistics states:**

Rapid advancements and innovations in virtual education are providing education agencies, educators, and students with new opportunities for teaching and learning. In recent years, virtual education has become an integral part of K12 education and nearly every student is exposed to virtual learning in some context, whether as a single aspect of a traditional course or program, in an entirely virtual program, or in any combination of traditional and virtual learning. (2015, p.1).

This research also explores the problem in the various opinions of parents, teachers, and administrators who usually state that virtual education does not have a positive future. But the reality is that children and teachers are quite familiar with virtual education, from the moment they use a device until they perform a task with the help of their tablet or a video, even when learning through a video tutorial in face- to-face classes.

Virtual education is often a core aspect of curricula and class instruction, and students and teachers are increasingly adept at integrating lectures, lessons, and group work delivered via computers, tablets, and other devices into day-to-day teaching and learning. Moreover, many students and teachers no longer distinguish between virtual and traditional learning — the technology and tools used in virtual education are familiar to them and are no more novel than a pencil. (National Forum on Education Statistics, 2015, p.1)

By synthesizing the information, the biggest problem that this research seeks to study is the need to break barriers for a quality virtual education, competency- based teaching and open doors to potentialize it by exploring teachers experience, contributions, and their

important professional opinions in this new stage that education around the world is facing up.

The competency-based education is a concept used for developing students' potential abilities, which focuses on outcomes of learning. Competency-based education addresses what the learners are expected to learn. Virtual simulators help learners practice the techniques spontaneously, while reducing the possible errors; using these methods, standards are better respected, and procedures are improved. (Mosalanejad, Shahsavari, Sobhanian, & Dastpak, 2020, p. 70.)

Throughout the next paragraphs, the most relevant literature that covers the topic of competency-based education will be reflected. Arguments, opinions and theory of different Costa Rican and foreign authors that enrich this investigation to give a broader panorama of the subject exposed in this thesis. The concepts and definitions, previous research, explanation of the study population as well as the English language development of preschool children will be presented, emphasizing the linguistic and cognitive area. Also, relevant theory about English Teaching in preschool Education and the newfangled perspectives of the virtual Education.

In the world of pedagogy and teaching, it is possible to find a diverse kind of methods that have been used throughout history according to global needs. From the pedagogy that is embodied in the writings of Socrates and his famous maieutic, to the most recent texts of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, who are the main founders of constructivism, as well as Howard Gardner and his theory of multiple intelligences.

The written Preschool study program exposed to the teaching population in 2014, continues to date. It was created due to the constantly changing world. Ministry of Public Education states: "Today's social, cultural, scientific and technological changes have generated different needs and interests in boys and girls, which is why it is necessary to create a new study program that satisfies them and takes into account their potential."(2014, p.11). In addition to this, it was necessary for the Costa Rican curriculum to respond to new scientific advances in the field of education and neuroscience.

Through the research project previously developed, the problem formulated was related to the impact of the Competency-Based Education from the Costa Rican Preschool

program and the use of teaching strategies in a virtual environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Curry & Docherty (2017) have stated:

CBE (Competency Based Education), if well implemented, provides a framework for faculty and students to become true partners in the educational enterprise. CBE design identifies and structures minimally necessary learning outcomes connecting the classroom, lab, and experiential placement to requirements of the next level training and to real-life practice. (p. 65)

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***Campo expone:***

A research carried out in the field of neuroscience related to learning, memory, emotions, motivation, sensory, attentional and motor systems,



among others, indicate that curricular proposals must include these discoveries since they are of vital importance for the educational field. In this sense, it is necessary to incorporate innovative proposals that promote pedagogical practice, which considers the harmony between the brain, learning and human development for the construction of meaningful learning by the student body. (2010, p.11).

On the other hand, the Preschool Program for Public Education in Costa Rica presents a constructivist approach to develop the pedagogical procedures. MEP (2014) “The curricular approach represents the theoretical orientation on which pedagogical practice is based. The Preschool Education Study Program based on the Educational Policy Towards the XXI Century, has a constructivist curricular approach” (2014, p. 14).

This approach is based on renowned researchers who provide valuable contributions, such as: Piaget (cognitive development and human information processing), Ausubel (meaningful learning), Bruner (acquisition of concepts), Vygotsky (sociocultural theory of development and zone of proximal or potential development) and Wallon (socio-affective development), which integrate a series of explanatory and articulated principles that allow diagnosing, establishing and making informed decisions about teaching and learning that seek to complement the theory with practice (Coll, 1996.)

As will be seen later in this document, "constructivism" and the "theory of multiple intelligences" are a fundamental part of the approach under study in this thesis: Competency-based teaching. Relevant information on this approach will be reflected in the following paragraphs.

The approach studied in this investigation is based on the acquisition of different abilities that is going to help the individual to use those skills in real life. According to Levine & Patrick: “Competency-based education is being implemented at deeper levels in more schools every year. It is a major shift in school culture, structures, and pedagogy focused on ensuring that all students succeed and addressing the fundamental shortcomings of the traditional model”. (2019, p.2)

This recent investigation made by Levine & Patrick shows some important statements about the concept of Competency-Based Education. The revised 2019 definition of competency-based education is:

1. Students are empowered daily to make important decisions about their learning experiences, how they will create and apply knowledge, and how they will demonstrate their learning.
2. Assessment is a meaningful, positive, and empowering learning experience for students that yields timely, relevant, and actionable evidence.
3. Students receive timely, differentiated support based on their individual learning needs.
4. Students progress based on evidence of mastery, not seat time.
5. Students learn actively using different pathways and varied pacing.
6. Strategies to ensure equity for all students are embedded in the culture, structure, and pedagogy of schools and education systems.
7. Rigorous, common expectations for learning (knowledge, skills, and dispositions) are explicit, transparent, measurable, and transferable (2019, p.3)

A competency-based school or district should implement all seven elements of the definition. Strong implementation also requires policies, pedagogy, structures, and culture that support every student in developing essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

Muluh states:

The competency-based approach is also referred to as the pedagogy of integration or to an outcomes approach. This approach entails the putting together of all the knowledge, know-how and attitudes required for the solution of real-life problems or situations. Put simplistically and with reference to language learning, using all the grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, and pronunciation to communicate effectively in real time listening, speaking, reading and writing situations. Furthermore, it consists of knowing what to do, where, when and with whom; or being linguistically, communicatively and socio linguistically competent with the learned language. (2012, p. 519).

This paper written by Muluh also presents an essential map to develop competencies and all the process. It is based on four components: Weddle (2006) (cited by Muluh, 2012) “1. An assessment of the learners needs, 2. The selection of the competencies 3. The target instruction 4. An evaluation of the competency attainment” (2012, p.520).

Competency-based education systems provide structures that increase the effectiveness of personalized learning, such as validation of proficiency based on student work, careful

monitoring of pace and progress, and an intentional focus on equity to ensure all students reach the same high standards. These competency-based structures form the foundation of equity for all students, with an expectation for demonstrating mastery through evidence. They also ensure that personalization does not reinforce traditional, inequitable structures such as tracking.

Another important statement about the competency-based education is the correlation of different types of skills in everything children face during the educational process. Also, the effective and meaningful action.

Indeed, the development of competencies involves certain characteristics and components: it involves the mobilization of specific knowledge of procedural, conceptual and attitudinal instruction, at the same time and in an interrelated manner in a particular context; requires the appropriation, assimilation and use functional content and diverse knowledge and implies attending to the complexity and demands of the authentic situations in which they face, for contextualized, effective and meaningful action. (Martinez & Rochera, 2010, p.1029).

The Ministry of Public Education from Costa Rica states three important characteristics for the preschool curriculum. The educational process during the lessons is based on mixing conceptual, procedural, and attitudinal skills at the same time.

On the other hand, competency-based education requires a specific evaluation. One important thing is that the evaluation by competences aims to develop knowledge. The teacher is a trainer and mediator more than a transmitter of knowledge. Villa & Poblete write the following:

Competency assessment has characteristics that have nothing to do with traditional assessment methods. Of these outstanding characteristics, the following: first, it is a formative and not summative evaluation; second, it must be based on the acquisition of levels of competence, and not on numerical scales; third, it must include previous knowledge and not be related limited to the program of the subject; fourth, we are facing a continuous and planned process, that is, it is not limited to a specific moment, normally at the end of the period; and fifth, in the competence evaluation the evaluator is more formative than vigilant. (2007, p.4).

Furthermore, the competency-based education includes many roles, is not just the teacher centered, but it looks to integrate the student environment. The intent of the competency assessment is to achieve a comprehensive performance, the main reason in the context of learning; This, in turn, represents behavioral changes of students, teachers, families and all entities committed to this training process. Human behavior change and learning have an inexorable link, since one makes the other's existence clear (López., Mejía & Vargas, 2018, p.5).

Regarding this, Robbins says: "Learning is any relatively permanent change in behavior that occurs as a consequence of an experience" (2004, p.43-44).

***Levine & Patrick state:***

Preparing all students for success in the modern world requires moving away from the traditional model of education to one that ensures equity and promotes deep student engagement and learning. Competency-based education is designed to meet this challenge, and its implementation is growing rapidly. The revised definition of competency-based education will help build the field by providing a common understanding of key elements of competency-based systems. The accompanying belief statements, FAQs, and resources will support the design and implementation of the effective, high-quality systems that are needed to ensure success for every student. (2019, p.7).

If Competency-Based Education is properly implemented, regardless of the teaching environment, the learning process will be appropriately developed and then applied in real life situations. However, a major challenge was faced by the English by Immersion teachers when schools were shut down for months and the need of assuring the continuity of the school year arose, even if that meant a swift change in the planning, execution, and assessment of the classes, now virtual and not face-to-face, as traditionally done for decades.

The most recent national governments have clearly affirmed the priority English teaching is and in 2019, MEP started implementing a pilot plan named "Abi (Alliance for Bilingualism), which consists of taking a minor group of preschool students to be instructed in the English language. Preschoolers are expected to acquire skills within 3 areas of child development: psychomotor, cognitive, and socio affective. And although

MEP's Preschool study program is characterized for interrelating all three areas, the research developed was focused on the competencies regarding the field of "Communication, Expression and Representation", which encompasses "oral comprehension, literacy, literature, phonological awareness, and oral expression related to English as a foreign language" (Villalobos, 2020, p 19), classified in three levels: initial, medium, or advance, according to the acquisition of the skills demonstrated by the student during each trimester of the school year.

### **METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGIES, RESOURCES, AND METHODS**

The research process was conducted with an applied approach, seeking to observe the characteristics of the chosen population, in this case, all teachers in the English by Immersion program by MEP. The study was developed in a certain period, specifically, during the months of January through August 2020, resulting in a transversal type of investigation with a dual purpose: descriptive and analytical.

Due to the use of opinions, interactions, and experiences from the participant teachers as sources of information, the nature of the research was qualitative, based in descriptions and interpretations. It was also a descriptive research, characterized as an attempt to determine, describe, or identify an event or phenomena (Dudovskiy, 2018).

The non-probabilistic population of participants in the study were chosen by the researcher using an inclusion criterion of all teachers registered in MEP's English by Immersion program. The sample entails all 30 immersion bilingual preschool teachers in Costa Rica, covering the entire universe of individuals.

A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect data from the participants, with the purpose of verifying if teaching English with a Competency-Based model is possible in a virtual environment for preschool education.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

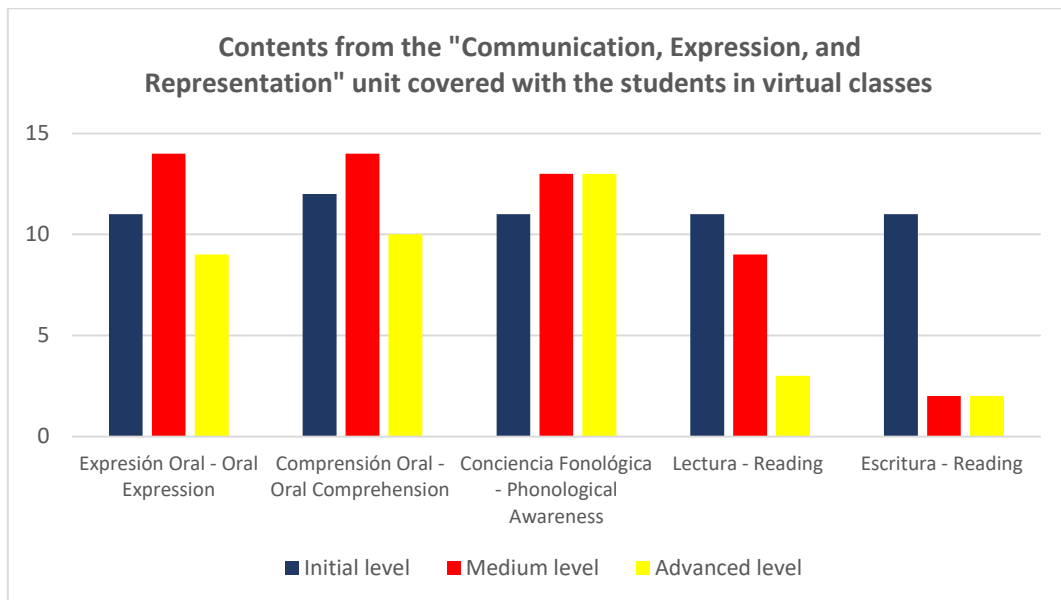
As mentioned above, all 30 immersion bilingual preschool teachers were considered in the study; however, 26 teachers voluntary participated in the study, providing the requested answers in the questionnaire. Is the authors' intention to share the most relevant results from the analysis and interpretation of the obtained information.

- Most teachers work in public preschool institutions located in the metropolitan area of the country (mainly Cartago and San José). It stands out that only 3 teachers work

in the areas of Limón and Puntarenas, and there is no evidence of an immersion teacher in the province of Guanacaste.

- 50% of the teachers have from 20 to 30 students per group. Nevertheless, only 6 teachers confirmed more than 20 and less than 30 children were currently active in the virtual classes. Most of the teachers, 19 out of 26, stated less than 20 students joined the classes during the first semester of 2020.
- According to the answers provided, 85% of the teachers agreed the “Communication, Expression, and Representation” unit of the National Preschool Program is based on learning by competencies and all participants indicated all contents and competencies were covered during the period of the study.

Figure 1



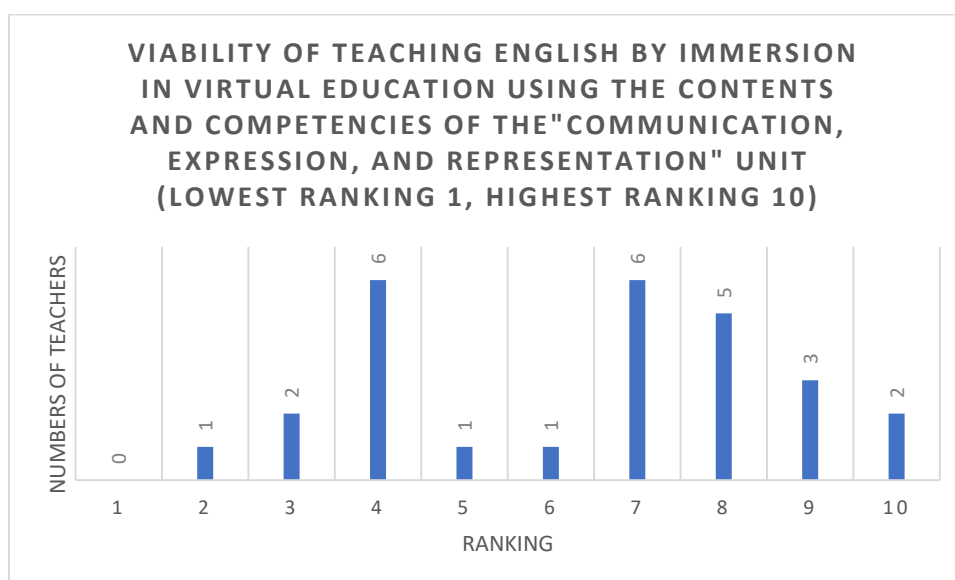
Note: The figure shows the number of teachers that were able to teach the contents from the “Communication, Expression, and Representation” unit, in each of the 3 levels.

- The Oral Expression, Oral Comprehension, and Phonological Awareness contents from the “Communication, Expression, and Representation” unit were covered up to a Medium level.
- The preschool students reached an Advanced level for the Phonological Awareness contents, according to the opinion of the teachers.
- The Reading and Writing contents were mainly assessed within an Initial level in the preschoolers.
- When asked about the strategies used to efficiently teach the contents from this unit

of the program in a virtual modality, 65% of the teachers considered they succeeded, but it was difficult to create these strategies and around 30% stated they did not succeed.

- YouTube, educational videos, PowerPoint, educational games, and Joy School were the most used tools that facilitated teaching.
- Some strategies planned and developed by the teachers to cover the contents of the “Communication, Expression, and Representation” unit were: puppets, role play, phonological bingos, small conversations, audio exercises, riddles, jokes, short stories, audiobooks, dancing, and singing.
- 73% of the teachers considered it is possible to teach English in virtual education because of their ability to adapt to a new environment and the proper use of the right tools for this purpose. On the other hand, 27% agreed it is not possible, due to the absence of a device to join the classes, the lack of internet connection, the poor previous exposure to the language, and the constant dependence on the families to continue the learning process.
- Regarding the viability of teaching English by Immersion in a virtual environment, using the contents and competencies of the unit mentioned above, most teachers used a higher number in the scale, to show an optimistic preference, as demonstrated in the following figure.

**Figure 2**



*Note: The figure shows the number of teachers who ranked the viability of teaching English by Immersion in virtual education, in a scale from 1 to 10*

- There is a general opinion from the teachers, related to the support provided by families during the virtual education process, considered between “regular” and “great”, with very little support to most of the families involved in the process.
- 69% of the participants declared they received support and training from the institution, in relation to the teaching of English and the preschool curriculum.

## **CONCLUSION AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

*Upon considering the information provided by the participants of the study and the subsequent analysis, the major findings indicate the following:*

- From the perspective of the English by Immersion teachers, the Competency-Based Education according to MEP’s Preschool Program has had a positive impact in the virtual environment during the pandemic.
- Even though teachers have experienced the migration process from face-to-face classes to a virtual modality in different ways, most of them agree they have been able to promote teaching based on competencies.
- More than 30 different strategies were collected from the answers given by the teachers, which demonstrate the versatility and adaptability skills teachers have been developing to cope with virtual education.
- The Reading and Writing contents from the “Communication, Expression, and Representation” unit of the Preschool Program are in need of strengthening teaching – learning strategies, to scope a higher level of acquisition in the preschool students, particularly for those preparing for basic general education, first grade in specific.
- When analyzing the correlation between competency-based teaching and the achievement of a proficient learning of the second language in the virtual environment, it has been determined that:
- Competency-based achievement is regulated by the conditions that students must have in order for a proficient language learning to be effective, including: good connectivity, good parental support, discipline and motivation. This despite many children who are in the English by immersion program are lucky to have it, others are in disadvantage (Villalobos, 2020, p.112).



- The effects that virtuality has in the competency-based teaching of bilingual preschool teachers according to the unit “Communication, Expression and Representation” are mainly positive with a proper teacher training, an organized teaching process, and the appropriate support from the students’ families, to foster teaching innovation and autonomous learning of a second language.

Ultimately, more specific, and deeper studies can be developed around this topic. However, the results from this research have set a precedent to encourage new investigative processes that seek to discover other challenges teachers are encountering while teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, but mainly, to discuss the changes needed to provide them, the families, and most of all, the students, with the most accurate tools to learn, grow, and succeed in their educational process.

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