



## French teachers' Representations in Mexico: relation between learned skills when students and those prioritized in teaching

### Representaciones de los profesores de francés en México: relación entre las competencias aprendidas cuando estudiantes y las priorizadas en la enseñanza

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#### Resumen

Esta investigación compara las representaciones de los profesores de francés como lengua extranjera con las mantenidas por sus anteriores profesores de idiomas, acerca de la importancia que debe atribuirse a algunas competencias comunicativas (escuchar y hablar, leer y escribir) y a algunas competencias lingüísticas (gramática, vocabulario y la competencia sociocultural). Metodológicamente, se adoptó un enfoque mixto. Por un lado, se pidió a 142 profesores de FLE de varios estados mexicanos que respondieran a un cuestionario con el formato de respuesta tipo Likert. Los resultados indican una diferencia estadísticamente significativa para: la comprensión lectora ( $\chi^2(1, N = 142) = 6.78, p = 0.01$ ); la producción escrita ( $\chi^2(1, N = 142) = 9.95, p = 0.02$ ) y la competencia sociocultural ( $\chi^2(1, N = 142) = 4.28, p = 0.03$ ). De hecho, los resultados revelan que los profesores de hoy pondrían más énfasis en estas diferentes habilidades que los del pasado. Por otro lado, se realizaron 4 entrevistas a profesores de francés de los dos estados más representados en la encuesta por cuestionario (México y Sonora). En general, los resultados indican una marcada tendencia a la competencia oral como reacción a una mala experiencia de aprendizaje, con algunos profesores pasados, fuertemente orientados hacia el enfoque tradicional. En pocas palabras, se observa igualmente que la competencia lingüística de los profesores, su autoeficacia y la motivación de sus alumnos pueden determinar la importancia que otorgan a las habilidades y los componentes comparados.

**Palabras clave:** Representaciones, aprendizaje, enseñanza, competencias, francés como lengua extranjera

#### Abstract

This research compares French as a foreign language teachers' representations with those held by their prior language teachers, about the importance to be attributed to some communicative skills (listening and speaking, reading and writing) and some linguistic competences (grammar, vocabulary and sociocultural competence). Methodologically, a mixed method was adopted. On the one hand, 142 FLE teachers from various States of Mexico were invited to answer a questionnaire in the Likert response format. The results indicate a statistically significant difference for: reading ( $\chi^2(1, N = 142) = 6.78, p = 0.01$ ); writing ( $\chi^2(1, N = 142) = 9.95, p = 0.02$ ) and sociocultural competence ( $\chi^2(1, N = 142) = 4.28, p = 0.03$ ). In fact, the results reveal that today teachers would place a greater emphasis on these different skills than those of the past. On the other hand, 4 interviews were conducted with some French teachers from the most represented two states in the questionnaire survey (Mexico and Sonora). In general, the results indicate a high tendency for oral skills as a reaction to a poor learning experience with some past teachers, strongly oriented toward the traditional approach. In a nutshell, it is equally observed that teachers' language proficiency, their self-efficacy and their students' motivation may also determine the importance they provide to the communicative skills and linguistic competences compared.

**Key words:** Representations, learning, teaching, skills, French as a foreign language

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## 1. Introduction

Officially, the study of modern foreign languages in Mexico dates to the period of independence. In 1933, a presidential decree authorized the creation of several schools, including a high school that focused on the teaching/learning of foreign languages. As a sign of the historical impact of French in Mexico, in 1869, Benito Juárez, then president of the country founded a secondary school in which three languages, including French, were taught. Nearly a century later, the language appeared at the Escuela Normal Superior in 1943, where it was considered a subject of general knowledge. Soon after, precisely in 1945, French became a specialty in Mexico and, in this context, many French teachers were trained until 1986 when the language was cancelled by the Mexican government because it was no longer a compulsory subject in school (Gaboriaud, 1991).

Today, despite its low representation in the deployment of educational policies in recent decades, French language teaching seems to be increasingly gaining ground both in the country's private and public sectors. Indeed, according to statistics presented by France Éducation International (2021), between 2016 and 2019, the number of candidates enrolled in the DELF/DALF increased from 18560 to 23820, for a growth rate of 28%. These data probably indicate a renewed interest for French in the country. The growing interest in the teaching/learning of French as a Foreign Language is also reflected in educational policies with the recent partnership agreement between the Mexican Secretary of Public Education (now SEP) and the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs (MEAE) (See: <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/le-ministere-et-son-reseau/missions-organisation/>.) This collaboration aims at introducing French as a foreign language (the French acronym FLE will be preferred in this work) in different levels of public education in the country and strengthening Franco-Mexican cooperation. From the foregoing, it becomes necessary for scholars and researchers to conduct studies that can predict the potential outcomes of these recent developments. In this respect, it is assumed that various innovations might result from these political decisions. The innovation in this context is perceived in the logic of Carbonell (2001) who defines it as "a series of interventions, decisions and processes, with a certain degree of intentionality and systematization, which aims at changing the attitudes, ideas, contents, models and pedagogical practices" (García & Martija, 2006, 18).<sup>1</sup> It is therefore in this context that, this study, focused on French teachers' representations about the importance to attribute to the communicative skills and linguistic competences is conducted.

### 1.1 Communicative Skills and Linguistic Competences

It is important to point out that since the 1970s, in language teaching, there has been a progressive epistemological shift from the previous paradigms, based on a structuralist and even behaviorist vision of language, teaching and learning. These paradigms, which had long dominated modern language teaching and Latin, conceived language as a set of rules and exceptions to be studied, with speaking skill being placed in second place. In this vision, "the form of the texts used in class was more important than the meaning and

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<sup>1</sup> "una serie de intervenciones, decisiones y procesos, con cierto grado de intencionalidad y sistematización que tratan de modificar actitudes, ideas, culturas, contenidos, modelos y prácticas pedagógicas." (Original quotation)



there was an extensive use of artificial sentences, and the vocabulary was taught in form of lists of decontextualized words to be memorized along with their translations” (Germain, 1993, 103).

Whereas, from 1965 onwards, it is observed the emergence of the concept of communicative competence, used for the first time by Chomsky, who distinguishes between "competence" (knowledge of the rules of operation) and "performance" (application of these rules in discourse, to communicate). This concept was nevertheless updated by Hymes (1972), who added the socio-cultural component and the notion of "learner needs", which allowed for a complete break with previous paradigms. Since then, the communicative approach has been introduced, giving a new representation of the language, no longer as an object of learning, but rather as a tool for interaction and socialization.

Because of the great "influence" of communicative competence notion in foreign language teaching (Tornberg, 2009, 51), this research seeks to understand the importance FLE teachers give to this concept and to some linguistic competences (grammar, vocabulary, and the socio-cultural competence). The concept of communicative competence will be used interchangeably with “communicative skills” to refer to the learner's ability to speak, listen, read, and write while respecting the cultural codes related to the foreign language. Linguistic competence, for its part, embedded in communicative competence, will be limited to grammar, vocabulary and socio-cultural or pragmatic competence (Bachman, 1990, 87).

## 1.2 Teachers' Representations

According to Pajares (1992, 309), one of the main obstacles encountered by studies oriented towards “beliefs” is to be found in the clarification of this concept. In most scientific articles published in French, the concepts of "représentations" and “perceptions”, very close to "beliefs" are more popular than “croyances” which would be the literal translation of the concept as used in articles published in English. Indeed, Pajares indicates that the term "beliefs" refers, according to different authors, to the following concepts: attitudes, values, judgments, axioms, opinions, ideology, perceptions, conceptions, conceptual systems, preconceptions, dispositions, implicit theories, explicit theories, personal theories, internal mental processes, action strategies, rules of practice, practical principles, perspectives, repertoires of understanding and social strategy.

Faced with this terminological vagueness, in this work, the use of the concepts "representations" and "perceptions", as synonymous, will indicate the idea or opinion teachers have of a situation or about a subject from their personal experiences. More precisely, it is their opinion about the importance given to the linguistic competences and communicative skills. In fact, our choice was made on the concepts "representation / perception" because we are dealing with unverified opinions and impressions inferred from the participants' responses to a questionnaire and an interview.

Even though the representations may sound abstract and unverifiable, the fact remains that, in the field of pedagogy, they constitute a significant source of information that may help in getting a deeper knowledge of the teachers and the students. Additionally, as Borg (2019) points out, they may serve as an epistemological tool (for reflection), as an anchor point for the appropriation of knowledge. In this regard, it is believed that if a teacher holds traditional transmissive or constructivist representations about the language



teaching and learning, it will be reflected in his/her practices and in the importance conceded to the communicative skills and linguistic competences.

### 1.3 Role of Prior Learning Experience in Language Teaching

Since Lortie's (1975) work in the field of the sociology and education, it has been generally accepted that teachers' learning experience is an important factor influencing their conceptions of teaching/learning and their didactic techniques. Other authors argue that "even when students enter training programs, they filter out new theories based on their preformed conceptions, sedimented over the years when they were learners" (Eick & Reed, 2002, 402).

To discuss a few practical cases, Nurmich (1996) analyzed 26 teachers' diaries, when enrolled in a master's programs in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL). Teachers were encouraged to keep a diary to reflect, among other things, on the factors influencing their teaching methods. Based on data from the participants' diaries and observations, Numrich found that teachers tend to reproduce, consciously or unconsciously, the teaching methods to which they have been exposed as learners. In addition, in another study conducted by Farrell (1999), some university teachers were asked about their past experiences as English learners. The results revealed that some instructors had adopted approaches to which they themselves had been exposed as learners. These included the grammar-translation approach, with strategies for memorizing grammatical rules. Farrell notes that these strategies had been surprisingly adopted, even though some of these teachers had previously described them as uninteresting and tedious practices. These experiences rightly reveal that, not only is there a strong relation between teachers' experience as

## 2. Method

In this section, the research objective, the initial hypotheses, the investigation phases, the participants and the instrumentation will be presented consecutively.

### 2.1 Objective

The purpose of this article is to compare the representations of some FLE teachers in Mexico with those of their prior language teachers, regarding the importance each attach/ed to the linguistic competences and communicative skills. The purpose of this comparison is to determine, on the one hand, whether there is a statistically significant difference between some of the communicative skills and components learned by the teachers (as students) and those currently taught by them. And on the other hand, to understand the reasons for a possible discrepancy. Substantially, we argue that this comparison could provide insight into the extent to which the teacher's language learning experience impact their perception on language teaching.

The research question that will therefore guide us is the following: is there a statistically significant difference between the representations of FLE teachers and those they consider their past teachers were



holding regarding the importance to concede to the linguistic competences and communicative skills? what would be the reasons for a possible discrepancy?

## 2.2 Hypothesis

This work is based on the general assumption that teachers would reproduce in class the same patterns acquired during their learning, influenced by their former teachers' methodology. Indeed, some studies (Nurmich, 1996 and Farrell, 1999) have concluded that teachers reproduce, unconsciously or not, the methods known as learners. Based on the above, we formulate the null hypothesis and the following alternative hypothesis:

*H<sub>0</sub>*. At least one communicative skill or linguistic competence will present no statistically significant difference between French teachers' representations and those they believe their past foreign language teachers held.

*H<sub>1</sub>*. At least one communicative skill or linguistic competence will present a statistically significant difference between French teachers' representations and those they believe their past foreign language teachers held.

The present research is grounded in the two main paradigms of social science research: the positivist and post-positivist. Since one of the main characteristics of the positivist investigation is to explain the relation between different variables (Creswell, 2009), the first phase will determine the relation between teachers' language learning experience and the importance given to the communicative skills and linguistic competences. The second phase, inspired by the postpositivist or interpretative paradigm, will allow participants to verbalize their thoughts in relation to the object studied. In this regard, a few interviews will be conducted with four FLE teachers to understand the reasons of a probable discrepancy between their former foreign language learning experience and the importance they attribute to the skills and competences in question.

## 2.3 Research Phases, Participants and Measures

As per the survey, in the first phase, conducted between March and July 2021, 142 FLE teachers from various nationalities (mostly Mexican and French), distributed in different states of Mexico (highly concentrated in the states of Mexico, Sonora, Puebla and Veracruz), working in the basic, secondary, higher education and in some language centers, voluntarily responded to the online questionnaire. The different measuring instruments used here consist of 2 Likert scales (options ranging from 1 to 5). The first scale, on the one hand, consisted of 7 items whose response options range from "unimportant" to "very important" (see table 1).



**Table 1.**

**Scale 1. When you were learning French or another foreign language, how important were the following to your language teachers?**

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
Speaking					
Listening					
Reading					
Writing					
Grammar					
Vocabulary					
Sociocultural competence					

**Note.** 1. Unimportant, 2. Slightly important, 3. Moderately important, 4. Important, 5. Very important

On the other hand, the second scale, as the previous one, is also composed of 7 items with the same answer format, but this time with a different question: "When you teach French as a foreign language, what importance do you give to the following?" (see Table 2).

**Table 2.**

**Scale 2. When teaching French as a foreign language, what importance do you attach to the following?**

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
Speaking					
Listening					
Reading					
Writing					
Grammar					
Vocabulary					
Sociocultural competence					

**Note.** 1. Unimportant, 2. Slightly important, 3. Moderately important, 4. Important, 5. Very important

Regarding the analysis, the IBM SPSS version 23 statistics software was used to process the data. From the outset, we proceeded to a recodification of the constituent variables of the two scales. Thus, the polytomic responses were first converted into dichotomous responses, grouping, on the one hand, the "important" and "very important" responses, assigning them the numerical value 1 and grouping on the other hand, "unimportant", "not very important" and "moderately important", assigning them the numerical value 0.

After the results of the first phase indicated a statistically significant difference between reading, writing and the sociocultural language competence, a second phase was carried out, whereby, 4 interviews were conducted with FLE teachers from the states of Mexico and Sonora (the most represented two states in the questionnaire survey). The 4 teachers, coded as Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 3, and Teacher 4 all had pedagogical training and at least 5 years of experience in French teaching. Teacher 1 learned French as a foreign language, has a degree in the teaching of French, a C1 level of French and has been working in secondary and higher education for 18 years. Teacher 2 has also learned French as a foreign language, has a master's degree in education, estimated C1 level of French and has been working in the higher education for 8 years. Teacher 3 has also learned French as a foreign language and has a PRO-FLE diploma from the





French Ministry of Education, a level of French estimated at B2, works in secondary education, and has 5 years of professional experience. Teacher 4 learned French as a first language, has a master's degree in the teaching of French as a foreign language, a level of French estimated at C2, and has been working at the secondary and higher education for 12 years.

As per the interview protocol, the participants were asked to choose their most convenient language for the interview, to keep them in confidence and avoid any possible linguistic insecurity or misunderstanding. Two of them chose Spanish and the other two chose French. The main question for this interview was, "Do you feel today that you have been more or less inspired by your past language teachers, especially in terms of the importance they placed on listening and speaking skills, reading and writing, as well as grammar, vocabulary, and socio-cultural components?". The primary transcription was processed by an online software available on <https://noota.io/>. Later, the scripts were automatically generated by the online software. Then, each interview was listened and reviewed for correctness. The interviews were then analyzed through a content analysis method. For an accurate analysis of our scripts, we opted for a deductive coding, based on the following two categories: Prior communicative skills and linguistic competences. Each of these categories is broken down according to the following elements: Reading; writing; listening; speaking; sociocultural competence; grammar and vocabulary.

### 3. Results

The results of this research are described in two phases: first, the results of the quantitative analysis, and then the qualitative.

#### 3.1 Phase 1. Quantitative Results

A chi-square independence test (see Table 3) was carried out to examine the relation between FLE teachers' representations and those of their former language teachers, regarding the importance given to listening, writing, reading, speaking, sociocultural competence, as well as grammar and vocabulary. The analysis of the 2X2 contingency table for the chi-square was carried out for each of the components, producing the following results for speaking: when learning French or any other language, the importance given to this skill obtains a 96% value, and at the time of their teaching, teachers also consider that they attach an almost similar importance (95.7%). It is therefore observed, for this skill, that there is no significant difference between the representations of the importance that the participants' foreign language teachers had and their own representations, i.e.  $\chi^2(1, N = 142) = 0.01, p = 0.95$ . Since we obtain a p-value  $> 0.05$ , we confirm, for this specific case, the null hypothesis  $H_0$ , which indicates a lack of significant difference between the values of at least one skills or component of the two groups compared.



**Table 3.***Comparing the representations of the importance given to 1 linguistic competences and communicative skills*

	When learning	During my teaching	$\chi^2$	p
<b>Important</b>	Speaking	Speaking		
<b>Unimportant</b>	117	95.7% (112)	.004	.95
	25	96% (24)		
<b>Important</b>	Writing	Writing		
<b>Unimportant</b>	130	90% (117)	9.95	.02*
	12	58% (7)		
<b>Important</b>	Listening	Listening		
<b>Unimportant</b>	104	96.2% (100)	.13	.71
	38	36% (94.7)		
<b>Important</b>	Reading	Reading		
<b>Unimportant</b>	115	95.7% (110)	6.70	.01*
	27	81.5% (22)		
<b>Important</b>	vocabulary	vocabulary		
<b>Unimportant</b>	118	83.9% (99)	1.08	.29
	24	75% (18)		
<b>Important</b>	Sociocultural	Sociocultural		
<b>Unimportant</b>	56	92.9% (52)	4.28	.03*
	86	80.2% (69)		
<b>Important</b>	grammar	grammar		
<b>Unimportant</b>	130	90% (117)	2.47	.11
	12	75% (9)		

Note. n= 142

Regarding the representations of grammar and vocabulary, as well as listening skill, a pre-analysis of the different contingency tables revealed no statistically significant difference between the values of the participants' representations and those of their former teachers (grammar, vocabulary and listening with p values =0.11, p = 0, 29 and p = 0.71 respectively, all the p values > 0.05). The result is significant when the p values are inferior to 0.05 (p-value<0.05)

In addition, with respect to reading, we observed a statistically significant difference between the groups compared. In fact, the former teachers' representations about reading showed an 81.5% value while the current teachers' representations revealed a 95.7% value, that is,  $\chi^2(1, N = 142) = 6.78$ , p = 0.01. Since the p-value <0.05, this result confirms, in this specific case, the alternative hypothesis *H1*, stating that at least one communicative skill or language component would present a statistically significant difference between the teachers' representations and those of their former language teachers.

With respect to the representations about writing, the analysis of the contingency table indicates that it was moderately important (58.3%) during the teachers' prior language learning. However, in their teaching, they feel they attach greater importance (90%). This result reveals, once again, a statistically significant difference between the groups compared, with  $\chi^2(1, N = 142) = 9.95$ , p = 0.02. This is another evidence which confirms our alternative hypothesis *H1* indicating that there will come out a statistically significant difference between at least one communicative skill or language component compared.





Finally, regarding representations about the sociocultural competence, the results of the contingency table indicate a statistically significant difference between the teachers' representations in prior language learning and the one they concede in their teaching. In fact, the representation in prior learning experience obtained an 80.2% value while the teachers' representations obtained a 92.9% value, with  $\chi^2(1, N = 142) = 4.28, p = 0.03$ .

### 3.2 Phase 2. Qualitative Results

The results of this second phase are divided into two parts. In the first part, the different categories of analysis are deployed in the Table 4, projecting a picture of the thematic concern of each of those categories which refer to the past learning experience:

**Table 4.**  
*Category of analysis and themes developed in relation to prior learning*

	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4
<b>Prior learning experience</b>				
<b>Speaking &amp; Listening</b>	Very low interest was given to speaking and listening by my past teachers	Out of the many teachers, more were inclined towards grammar and neglected the other competences and left the socio-cultural activities completely to one side.	I've had teachers who have been putting enough emphasis on grammar, and not on interaction and when I went to France for the first time, I felt so disappointed and stressed up as I couldn't express myself the way I wanted	It really depends on the language studied and the context. I remember when studying Spanish 12 years ago here in Mexico, there was no emphasis on speaking and listening, but mostly on grammar, vocabulary, and writing
<b>Writing &amp; Reading</b>	Much interest was assigned to reading, writing and translation activities	High interest was conceded	Much importance was conceded to writing and reading	There was a high tendency of focusing the language learning on reading, writing and vocabulary. However, the context and the methodologies today are different
<b>Vocabulary</b>	Much interest was paid on the memorization of lists of vocabulary	High interest was conceded	High interest was given to vocabulary memorization	Enough interest was paid on the vocabulary
<b>Sociocultural</b>	Much interest was paid on sociocultural activities only when teachers were natives from France	The attention given to this was null. But interest was given to it when teachers were natives French speakers	Very little attention was given to the sociocultural activities until I met my last French teacher who took me to the B2 level	There was no particular attention given to this component
<b>Grammar</b>	In general, it was more a grammar-translation methods, without much emphasis on the other skills because it is much easier to teach grammar and vocabulary than other skills	Most of the previous teachers used to demonstrate a high attachment to this competence	Enough emphasis was conceded to grammar by most of the teachers	There was a significant importance attributed to this component



In the second part of this qualitative phase, the results concerning teachers' current teaching experience are organized in the Table 5, showing the main point about participants' opinions regarding the communicative skills and linguistic competences investigated.

**Table 5.**  
*Category of analysis and themes developed in relation to current teaching experience*

	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4
	<b>Current teaching experience</b>			
Speaking & listening	It really depends on the students and the school. In my first years of experience, I tried putting emphasis on speaking where I was working but the students were not motivated. Now in a different school, I try to give priority to speaking and listening	I personally feel that speaking and listening should be the ones that should have more weight, being in a communicative based approach	I think I try to give more importance to listening comprehension as well as speaking.	For me it really depends on the students' needs and the school requirements. If the school requires me to stress on some components, I will do exactly what they require if I have sufficient time
Reading & Writing	Used to concede much interest, but today, with the experience over the years, I no longer do it	Don't give interest to reading and writing because they can in any case be supported by translators. Has turned in to an even distribution of weigh between the four communicative skills after a training as a DELF examiner	I give very little importance to writing and reading.	It mostly depends on the public and the context
Vocabulary	I don't give a special treatment to the vocabulary	I don't give a special treatment to the vocabulary	No special attention is given to the vocabulary	No special attention is given to the vocabulary
Sociocultural	I give enough importance to this skill as my former French teachers did because it's always motivating for the learners	Try to give as much importance as my prior native teachers did in the past	I try to create current and real situations so that my students get to know the French culture or even the French-speaking culture.	I provide considerable interest to the sociocultural and pragmatic knowledge
Grammar	Most of my students today, especially the technology students prefer a deductive treatment of grammar, since they're used to memorizing formulas	I don't give a special treatment to grammar	When I started, I have been teaching more grammar, and I saw that it was not working with my students. I had to find activities or games to practice grammar.	I treat grammar in context, no focus is given to it, since the objective is to communicate, grammar being just the form and not the end



In general, it appears from the discussion with Teacher 1 that his approach and the importance given to linguistic skills and communicative competences have evolved due to some contextual factors beyond his mere French language learning experience. He believes that when he first started as a university student, he was much more interested in oral communication and knowledge of French culture. However, the experience with some teachers still did not fit this need. That is why he feels there are teachers who inspired him and others who did not as he says:

Some teachers inspired me. There were teachers that I didn't like. There were practices that I don't bring to my class, I don't bring to my class [...] I really like, I really like to talk about film, I really like to talk about a lot of interesting things about the origin of certain words and expressions and so on. And that comes from... from some teachers. Some teachers were more focused on grammar. But in general, I think I have changed a lot in the last ten years. I had a very different way of teaching and I had to adapt [...] In order to have a more modern teaching, let's say<sup>2</sup>.

When asked what seems to have changed in his so-called modern practices, this teacher feels that his teaching has changed a lot since he moved to a technological high school that takes French learning much more seriously. Indeed, in the past, despite his misadventures with grammar and language structures, he felt obliged to continue to give importance to these components because French was not taken very seriously in his schools and it was the easiest way to occupy students who, for the majority, were not motivated and for whom French was only a subject without stake, as he states below.

I taught in schools that were. I taught in schools that were not very serious about teaching French, for example in a secondary school and in a high school the French subject was mandatory, but the grades had no impact on their final grade. So, the kids had to be present. But whether they passed or not didn't matter because it wasn't going to affect their academic life, so. Many of the students didn't want to be in the class and didn't care. It was hell [...] and the class was pretty much grammar-translation, sometimes, other times, I faithfully followed the textbook and didn't have a lot of opportunities to take advantage of other skills<sup>3</sup>.

It is observed with Teacher 1, on the one hand, that he gives as much importance to socio-cultural activities as his past teachers and would have liked to give more importance to oral skills at one time, but without success, given that the institutional context appeared to be a hindrance. On the other hand, in the ten years prior to our interview, he feels that his practices have evolved towards a more integrated and balanced approach, thanks to the school context. And so, it becomes clear that the emphasis on communicative skills and linguistic competences in the classroom goes far beyond the teacher's experience of language learning, because even unintentionally, the teacher may find himself or herself in a grammar-translation approach that seems easiest to implement to occupy learners who are poorly motivated to develop their communicative skills in French.

Teacher 2 for his part indicates that some past FLE teachers must have influenced him in the way he approaches grammar in the classroom and at the level of the importance he places on communicative skills and linguistic competences. According to him, when he was a university student, many teachers gave more

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<sup>2</sup> Translated from French.

<sup>3</sup> Translated from French.



importance to grammar, which he did not like at all, and when he had French native teachers, they were the ones who gave more importance to culture, something that strongly influenced him to reproduce these practices in his classes as he mentions below:

I had quite a few teachers throughout my education [...] I had a lot of variety, but I feel that some teachers leaned more towards grammar and neglected the other competencies and left sociocultural activities in the background. [...] when I had native teachers, they were the ones who talked to me about. Well, about cultural issues that attract the attention of, I think, any person who is learning another language, to know another culture, another gastronomy, other habits, so, each one had their own strategy, but they did motivate me in a certain aspect. And it was consolidating in me a way of teaching in which I try to address all the competencies and not just lean towards grammar as it was before at the university where I studied<sup>4</sup>.

Furthermore, still concerning Teacher 2, he also reveals that his propensity to address communicative skills in a balanced way was reinforced a few years ago after attending the DELF (Diplôme d'Étude de la Langue Française) markers' accreditation seminar organized under the auspices of France Education International. We note with this teacher that, in addition to the influence of his experience in the learning of French as a foreign language as a determining factor in the importance given to linguistic skills and components, another equally important factor is juxtaposed: the teacher's training as a DELF examiner. In relation to Teacher 3's experience, she states that she tries to replicate the scenarios of her past teachers, especially her last native teacher who led her to B2 level with a teaching oriented towards Francophone cultures, much more updated and closer to real life learning. Additionally, the other reason for conceding more importance to the listening and speaking is related to her travel experience in France, given that she had to struggle a lot to listen and speak. She states:

Actually, I think I'm trying to do things that I've learned with my previous teachers. It's the teacher I had before I got to have the B2. I try to create current and real situations so that my students get to know the French culture or also the French-speaking culture in fact. I think that when I started, I have been teaching with exercises the world of grammar, and I saw that my students, these strategies don't work. I had to find dynamics or games to practice grammar. And now my students are not very used to doing repetitions, drills and all written exercises. I think I try to give more importance to listening and also to speaking [...] When I went to France, I didn't really understand anything, and it was difficult. So now, with my students, I try even if they are at the beginner level, to try to get them to understand the basic things. But with the French pronunciation<sup>5</sup>.

With Teacher 3, we also observe that her experience as an FLE learner has shaped her representations of grammar and the importance to be given to the communicative skills. We observe that, in addition to having been positively influenced by past teachers to move towards a sociocultural approach to learning and teaching (Johnson, 2009), she had a language immersion experience that strongly contributed to consolidating her representations.

Regarding Teacher 4 whose first language is French and who learned Spanish in Mexico instead, he states that he was equally interested in both oral and written language, as the purpose of his learning was

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<sup>4</sup> Translated from Spanish.

<sup>5</sup> Translated from French.



mainly to study in the country. For him, his teachers placed much more emphasis on written grammar and writing skills than on oral skills. But from his point of view, the teaching of French and Spanish in Mexico do not serve the same purpose. As a result, he does not find any influence of his Spanish learning process on his perception of FLE teaching. However, what he finds important and decisive is the expressed need of the learner and the objectives assigned to the FLE teacher. This is what he believes determines his teaching approach and the importance given to communicative skills and linguistic competences. In this regard, he states:

What was most important, for me, was speaking. I was going to be able to speak. In my classes, there was a propensity in grammar and vocabulary, of course. In that sense they were right because it depends, in learning a language it depends on the communicative purpose you want, because in my case, it was much more learning the language for written communication and reading written reports. So I was learning grammar. I don't think my language learning experience in an academic setting or in an academic environment has influenced my experience as a teacher very much. So I try to adapt to the needs of my students and the objectives of the program<sup>6</sup>.

It is clear from the above that it is not possible to generalize about the impact of teachers' learning experience in their perception of language teaching. It may depend as Teacher 4 said on the context of their learning, the language learned and the purpose of that learning. In addition, it can also depend on what language is taught and the purpose of that teaching.

## 4. Discussion

The statistical analyses carried out in the first phase have made it possible to get a few findings. The first salient point is the statistically significant difference between prior language teachers and current FLE teachers' representations of the communicative skills (reading, writing) and linguistic competence (sociocultural competence). In fact, current FLE teachers' representations about these skills and competence appeared to be higher than that of prior teachers. This difference could be explained by the fact that a great number of French learners in the Mexican context do not only study this language for the pleasure of speaking, but much more for academic reasons. This would probably explain the growing interest of learners in the DELF/DALF certifications which give equal weight to oral and written skills, the socio-cultural skill being transversal.

As indicated earlier in our introduction, the growth in the enthusiasm of young Mexican students to take French courses could be explained in part by the institutional requirement of justifying a B1 level of French as one of the eligibility conditions for international mobility in programs such as MEXFITEC,<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Translated from Spanish.

<sup>7</sup> The objective of MEXFITEC is to allow university students from engineering programs to obtain a professional co-tutored bachelor's degree in France within one year in continuity of their studies in Mexico. The program includes intensive French courses for four weeks in France, immersion in French culture, enrollment at the host university, tutoring, professional internships in a French company so that after a period of one year, students can obtain a professional license.



MEXPROTEC<sup>8</sup> and many other programs. Students are thus entitled to take French courses based on the development of all communicative skills to subsequently take an international diploma of French language or an international test (DELFDALF or TCF exam). Considering this analysis, today's teachers have a much greater obligation to attribute even weight to the four communicative skills than those in the past.<sup>ii</sup>

Triangulating the results of the first phase with the second, it is observed that the qualitative analysis corroborates the quantitative, indicating an increasing emphasis on written skills. Indeed, we observed with Teacher 2 that, initially, he placed more importance on oral skills. However, after being trained as a DELF examiner, he had to change his beliefs and increase the importance given to written skills to achieve an equal weighing between written and spoken communicative skills.

Equally important is the fact that we did not find a statistically significant difference between the importance that past and present teachers placed on listening and speaking skills in the quantitative phase of the study. However, in the second phase, the triangulation with the qualitative data revealed that the participants felt they either place more importance on these skills or they simply think they teach in a balanced manner, while their past teachers were teaching more grammar-oriented lessons. This data somewhat contradicts the statistics obtained earlier. But at the same time, it justifies once again the interest of having chosen to approach this question from a mixed method, thus opening the door to discussion and in-depth understanding of the participants' opinions.

Another important aspect that emerges from both results (quantitative and qualitative) is the fact that the participants feel they give sufficient importance to listening and speaking skills. In theory, one could expect low values from the participants' representations in relation to the importance conceded to those skills, given that some research on the teaching of English in Mexico (Bremner, 2017) have revealed that classes are generally teacher-centered, and for this reason, some teachers who have lived in immersion in this system, carry with them quite strong representations of traditional teaching. If several language teachers hold these representations, it would normally be difficult for them to attach, as they claim, major importance to oral skills which are more of a learner-centered approach. But on the other hand, it has been observed that this context has rather had an antagonistic effect on many teachers as Teacher 2 so well illustrates. Indeed, having had several teachers who in the past gave a preponderant place to written grammar, this teacher decided to turn away from it and to focus on oral skills.

Additionally, Blin and Olmedo Yúdice (2017) indicates that the conceptualization of pedagogical grammar in Mexico is done, most of the time, solely based on verbal morphological descriptions of writing. Here again, we find a scheme prioritizing a teacher-centered approach, because the authors indicate that teachers take very little account of verbal forms as used orally. In view of this context, which is not in favor of the oral skills, one can rightly wonder about the presence of a probable bias of social desirability, since it is possible for teachers to pretend, they give a high importance to those skills just to appear as "good teachers". Also, some might unconsciously overestimate the degree of importance given to those skills because as Nurmich (1996) and Farrell (1999) have shown, the representations declared, even in good faith, may in some cases be different from the teacher's practices. We do not also exclude the possibility that these

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<sup>8</sup> The MEXPROTEC program is like the previous, but the difference is that it is addressed to college students (universidades tecnológicas): with intensive French courses (four weeks) and one year of study in the major engineering schools in France.





representations might be truthful and stand in line with the actions of the participants in their respective language classrooms because as we mentioned above, there is an increasing demand from learners for obtaining French certifications which give even priority to oral and written skills.

Contrarily to this viewpoint, the qualitative results has revealed that the use of a traditional approach may not only be conditioned by a mere learning experience of the teacher or by a textbook, since each teacher is supposed make use of authentic materials and create some, following their students' needs. There may be other factors like the students' motivation, the institutional context and the teacher's experience as a user of the foreign language taught. These different factors, which were not considered at the outset, also contribute to the choice of approach and the importance to be given to linguistic skills and components. With regard to the students' motivation, the self-determination theory distinguishes two principal types of motivations: the intrinsic and the extrinsic (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Most of the time, the students intrinsically motivated would always want their teachers to adopt a more constructivist approach in order to provide them the necessary tools to integrate themselves in the foreign language culture by dominating the spoken language. In contrast, the extrinsically motivated students would want a more traditional approach of language learning where they will be called upon to memorize some grammatical structures which will be memorized and reproduced during the exam, regardless of their ability to use to structures in real life conversation. Therefore, a teacher's decision to highlight some skills or competence during his/her language class may be guided by the students' motivation.

The interview with Teacher 4 also revealed that teachers' language proficiency may have a direct relationship with the excessive use of the traditional approach in class and the "blind" following of textbooks proposed by publishers. He believes that teachers with a low language proficiency would always tend to be traditional in their class. In fact, according to a study by Richards et. al. (2013), teachers' content knowledge appears to be an essential component of quality teaching. And in this context, teachers' content knowledge includes language proficiency. The study reveals that teachers with limited language proficiency tend to develop less activities based on oral skills than the teachers with better proficiency skills as they are more preoccupied with their own language difficulties. Another study was even able to find a moderate relationship between teacher self-efficacy and teacher language level (Faez, et. al., 2021). Indeed, a teacher may feel linguistically insecure and frustrated with learners or colleagues. Sometimes in language classes, some learners may have a level of oral proficiency that is close to that of their teachers, due to their multiple trips abroad and their language immersion experiences. This situation could lead some teachers to frustrations, because, unlike other subjects, the language here is not only an instrument of communication in the classroom, but also, it is the object and focus of teaching. All this would justify the adoption of a grammar-centered approach by some teachers, finding in grammar a security and comfort zone.

Another important point that emerged from the interviews was the strong inclination of the teachers towards listening and speaking. Indeed, the four teachers interviewed indicated that they give more importance to listening and speaking than their past teachers. This result indicates that the traditional approach would have more and more retreat in FLE classes as the new generation of teachers are more attached to the communicative based and action based approach recommended by the European Council (2002). Nevertheless, we cannot rule out the likelihood of a social desirability bias on the part of teachers,



as the general tendency is often to oppose the traditional approach to constructivist approaches, "demonizing" it in the course. These two approaches are often perceived as antagonistic. However, both approaches are complementary in foreign language teaching. In fact, according to Decoo (1996), there is a continuum between the traditional teaching which gives more weight to the grammar and the written language and the constructivist vision that prioritizes the spoken language and an inductive-explicit grammar teaching. Puren (2001) talks about an eclectic approach, which means that teachers always use different approaches in class. The qualitative analysis carried out here reveals that French as foreign language teachers are more often inclined to the communicative approaches, based on the constructivist vision. In fact, after analyzing eight French textbooks, Bento (2019), notes that grammar is more often contextualized, which corresponds to the principles of the action-based approach. This orientation provided by the publishers could contribute favorably to strengthening the use of communicative and action-based approach in French language classroom.

The various interviews conducted with the four FLE teachers in this research also revealed that the virtual modality resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic could significantly enhance the emphasis on oral skills in FLE teaching, as it offers the teacher more facility in projecting images, videos or other resources in class, something which normally would require adapted devices in traditional classrooms. However, this modality in some cases produce adverse results. In fact, Teacher 2 indicates that he finds it easier to share interactive resources, videos, images, etc., with his students. Nevertheless, he indicates that these scenarios sometimes take him quite a long time and, sometimes, due to technical difficulties and poor internet quality, he is obliged to use a deductive approach which consists in directly giving the learners the rules to be memorized without, however, progressively leading them to infer them from the authentic documents (taken from real life and not initially conceived for pedagogical purposes).

I think in this virtual modality it is easier to approach the visual part, although in my personal point of view, I still prefer the face-to-face modality or something hybrid, because I feel that technologies always fails[...] sometimes, if due to technical failures, you can't listen, or you invite the student to participate and he/she doesn't have a good internet signal, then all of this wastes time and sometimes leads me to, let's say in a preliminary way, to the deductive part.<sup>9</sup>

Even if the virtual modality French language teaching during the pandemic has facilitated the use of various authentic resources that were sometimes difficult to exploit in a traditional setting, we can see that it has also had a significant impact on the use of the inductive (which consists in taking the student to discover the rule on his/her own) and the deductive (which consists in giving the learner the grammatical rule directly) grammatical approaches. But overall, in an effort to avoid having learners use automatic translators in French assessments, teachers have placed more emphasis on oral assessment of learners based on video recordings.

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<sup>9</sup> Translated from Spanish.



## 5. Conclusion

In a nutshell, the quantitative analysis carried out in this study has allowed us to highlight a discrepancy between today's teachers' representations and those they claim their past teachers held concerning writing and socio-cultural skills. It was realized that teachers do not systematically reproduce the patterns known during their learning process, since they do not fully agree on the importance to be given to some communicative skills and linguistic competences. We have attributed the growth of emphasis on writing to the increased interest of FLE learners in taking the DELF exams, which offer an even weight distribution to the oral and written skills. From the point of view of FLE teacher training, this result is of great interest insofar as it implies a greater consideration of the dynamism and evolution of the different learning objectives of French in teacher training programs. Therefore, if the reasons for learning more and more French are evolving, the same evolution must be made at the level of teacher preparation because, for example, an engineering student who takes FLE with the aim of passing a DELF will not be trained in the same way as another who takes the course simply as a compulsory subject in his program.

It was equally found from the qualitative survey that FLE teachers are quite aware of the importance to strengthen their learners' oral skills. However, the results indicated that some variables such as the institutional policy, the teachers' language proficiency, their objectives and the learners' motivation might have an influence on their decision to adopt a teaching method whereby some communicative skills and linguistic competences might be prioritized or marginalized. In this case, it is the speaking skills that are often marginalized due to these contextual variables. Therefore, it becomes important for school leaders, teachers, and language teacher educators to understand the factual difficulties that teachers encounter daily in implementing the different methodological approaches proposed. In the case of teaching FLE in Mexico, it is often believed that if the teacher is oriented towards the traditional approach, it is because of a lack of training on his or her part. With that stated, for true educational change, it would be appropriate as proposed by Fullan (2007) for the entire educational system to come together to develop learning communities in which teachers and leaders work together to improve learning conditions and educational outcomes in professional learning communities (PLC).

As per the methodology, the use of a mixed approach has been complementary and enriching. Indeed, it could be observed that the quantitative survey provided limited information, given that no significant difference between the importance given to oral skills by today's teachers and those of the past was found in the first phase. Besides, it could not provide the rationale for the discrepancy between the representations of the two groups compared. However, in the second phase, from an interpretative perspective, a significant difference between the groups compared was quickly observed as well as the reason for the discrepancies.

Furthermore, it was observed in the qualitative phase that the renewed interest for the sociocultural skill was directly related to the positive experience of some teachers who had native French teachers in the past. The findings of this research provide more information about FLE teachers' representations and may also lay foundation for the elaboration of different French teachers' development programs. In fact, when we analyze the principles of the main language teaching methodologies, we realize that, among the main indicators that differentiate one from the other, is the importance that each one attributes to the different communicative skills and linguistic competences. Thus, the results of this research might help evaluating or



identifying the extent to which teachers use certain teaching methodologies or approaches and the reason of their decisions, given that bringing about a change in teaching practices involves working directly with the teachers to understand their daily difficulties and their representations. As mentioned earlier, the teachers' practices are always determined by the representations they have about the learning and teaching processes, about their role as teachers, about the students and about the object of learning which, in this case, is the language (Starkey-Perret, 2013).

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