

# UNIVERSITY LANGUAGE PROGRAMS: THE EARLY SIGNS OF UNDERLYING PROFESSIONALIZATION

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## Abstract

This article analyzes the integration of professional skills into language university programs, with a particular focus on the French language degree. It highlights an interactive dynamic between theoretical knowledge and practical skills, emphasizing how these elements complement each other to prepare students for the demands of the job market while maintaining a balance with academic values. The article proposes curricular adjustments to reinforce this dynamic and integrate 21st-century skills, while also suggesting research perspectives to evaluate the impact of these reforms on graduates' employability.

## Key words

Education, languages, professionalization, professional skills, practical knowledge

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## Introduction

In response to the transformations within professional spheres, universities worldwide are striving to align their education with the demands of the labor market to increase the employability of their graduates (Boston Consulting Group, 2023). In this context, didactics specialists are working to align education with current professional needs, making the integration of professionalization a priority in higher education language programs (Cleary & Van Noy, 2014).

In Algeria, universities have adopted the LMD system since 2004 to promote the professionalization of students by restructuring programs and their content. However, this reform has been criticized for its difficulty in reconciling educational objectives with professional demands, despite the evolution of the university system toward an “alignment” model (Ghouati, 2015: 165).

Within language programs, the evolution of Algerian society and global changes necessitate the regulation of these curricula (Giraud, 2009), anticipating future needs in parallel with socio-economic shifts. It is within this framework that this contribution seeks to examine university language programs to identify the early signs of professionalization in their structure and content from both structural and organizational perspectives (Lemenu & Heinen, 2016). The aim is to propose avenues for reflection, informed by educational and pedagogical engineering (Ardouin, 2017), to reconfigure these curricula and equip graduates with operational skills for the professional sector. This endeavor, aligned with the PRFU project “Professionalization of Language Programs in the Algerian University Context” (2022), examines the elements that either support or hinder the professionalization of these programs. By analyzing the relationship between professionalization and education (Wittorski, 2012), we suggest that certain knowledge within language programs can be developed into practical and professional competencies, thus requiring curricular adjustments to strengthen their professionalizing focus.

To substantiate these claims, we begin by defining key terms related to academic, professional, and professionalizing education (Ardouin, 2017; Holec & Porcher, 1987; Manyenga & Yakam, 2020), in close relation to various university models (Bourdoncle & Lessard, 2016; Charle & Verger, 2012), in order to understand their connection to professionalization (Wittorski, 2012). This analysis will begin with a

theoretical exploration of the essential concepts necessary for understanding professionalization in the university context (Bourdoncle & Lessard, 2002; 2016; Wittorski, 2012). Subsequently, it will focus specifically on the French language degree to examine its academic, professional, and professionalizing components based on the structural and organizational dimensions of the program (Lemenu & Heinen, 2016). This examination will be conducted using specific criteria (Barbier, 2011; Prégent, Bernard & Kozanitis, 2009), notably the relationship between knowledge and practice, which constitutes the main manifestation of the knowledge/competence dynamic, as well as the balance between theory and practice in the development of students' skills. Finally, an analysis of the results will highlight the interactive and complementary dynamics between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge (Barbier, 2011), emphasizing the necessary curricular adjustments to establish the principles of professionalization in language programs.

## **1. University education: the disciplines-professionalization continuum**

Discussing the nature and characteristics of university education within the framework of university models and reforms is rooted in the continuum between disciplines and professionalization. This perspective allows for a sequential presentation of the types of university programs and highlights the concepts associated with each typology, systematically identifying traits related to professionalization within a university context. As a prelude, succinct definitions of education are useful.

Ardouin (2017) describes education as a process aimed at providing the means for acquiring knowledge within a specific context and with a defined objective. Holec and Porcher (1987) view it as preparation for a profession, equipping individuals with the necessary qualifications to assume responsibilities. ManyeNga and Yakam (2020) conceive it as a set of activities ensuring the acquisition of practical skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for employment. These definitions align on the acquisition of competencies and knowledge but diverge regarding the nature of the competencies, the methodological approach, and the context of application, thus recalling three categories of education: academic, professional, and professionalizing.

### **1.1. Academic university education: the weight of disciplinary knowledge**

Since the emergence of Western universities in the 13th century (Charle & Verger, 2012), their primary role has been the transmission of knowledge, organized according to disciplines shaped by their own evolution and the contexts in which they developed. This structure, often dominated by academic knowledge rooted in these disciplines, aligns with the concept of the "liberal university" (Bourdoncle & Lessard, 2016), which promotes intellectual exchange across multidisciplinary fields and fosters intellectual training. This conception of the university allowed the master-student community to transmit and acquire knowledge while remaining adaptable, evolving in response to societal needs. This adaptability is evident in the way medical knowledge is applied by doctors to treat patients, or how architectural knowledge is employed by architects to construct buildings.

### **1.2. Professional University Education: The Utilitarianism of Disciplines and Research**

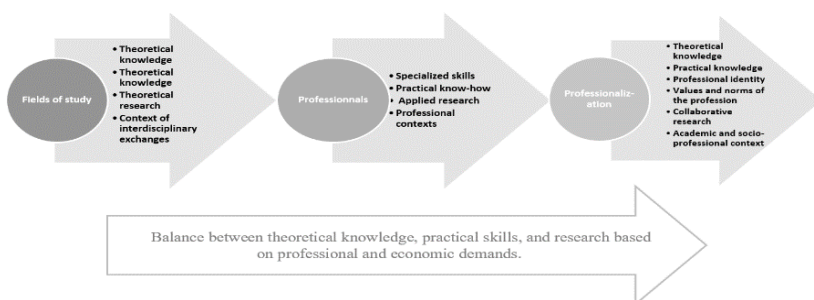
The transformations of Western societies and academic disciplines from the 16th to the 19th centuries gradually led to a conception of the university where teaching and research mutually reinforce each other, with the aim of establishing truth and

grounding knowledge in disciplinary epistemology (Charle & Verger, 2012). This reciprocal relationship developed particularly within specialized university structures, such as surgery and engineering, which were oriented toward specific career paths. Since then, professional education has evolved through short courses, advanced technical training, and new professional disciplines, responding to the increasing demand for specialized skills in a technologically advanced context (Charle & Verger, 2012). These programs aim to professionalize knowledge and skills by integrating theoretical knowledge with practical expertise, thereby developing competencies that are directly applicable in the workplace (Bourdoncle & Lessard, 2002). This process requires frameworks focused on the acquisition of essential tools and techniques necessary to perform effectively in specific professional contexts (Wittorski, 2012).

### 1.3. Professionalizing University Education: Adapting Disciplines and Research to Societal Imperatives

In the context of an emerging university that seeks to meet societal expectations and foster progress (Bourdoncle & Lessard, 2016), professionalizing education has become the primary vehicle for developing graduates equipped not only with theoretical, scientific, and professional knowledge but also with a “professional identity” (Wittorski, 2012). This identity is shaped by the values and norms of the profession, reinforcing a sense of belonging to a professional community. To achieve this, the education provides tools, techniques, and professional behaviors deemed legitimate by the professional community.

**Figure 1:** The continuum between disciplines and professionalization



Source: Developed by the author based on theoretical elements related to types of university programs (Bourdoncle & Lessard, 2002 ; 2016 ; Wittorski, 2012).

Moreover, this process requires the establishment of a reflective collective where individuals can exchange ideas on best professional practices. For it to be effective, the design of this education must consider its context, social evolutions, and the specificities of various professions. The objective is to offer a relevant curriculum that addresses the actual needs of the professional environment. This harmony between the academic and professional spheres is realized through partnerships with local and international economic operators who work continuously towards resolving socio-professional challenges (Ghouati, 2024).

### 1.4. Professionalization: A boon or a misfortune for university programs

Demazière and Wittorski describe professionalization as a “complex social process” (2022: 278), as it permeates various social spaces, particularly universities, to address evolving socio-economic needs. This process presents both opportunities and

challenges for university language programs. On the one hand, professionalization fosters the development of knowledge and skills through mechanisms such as the competency-based approach and program-based approach, which structure knowledge within a training framework designed to meet professional requirements (Loisy and Coulet, 2018; Prégent, Bernard & Kozanitis, 2009). However, this trend may also result in negative consequences, such as excessive standardization of studies, potentially undermining diversity and intellectual reflection, as noted by international critics (Point, 2021). At the national level, Ghouati (2015) emphasizes that, within the framework of the LMD reform, professionalization in Algeria remains more academic than practical due to the limited involvement of economic actors and the dominance of administrative over pedagogical concerns, raising questions about the validity of degrees that are not explicitly professional.

**2. The french language degree program in light of professionalization**

The examination of university language programs, particularly the french language degree, is conducted through an analytical model that integrates both the structural and structuring dimensions of the programs. According to the typologies of university programs, each dimension is associated with indicators that help identify early signs of professionalization. The indicators for the structural dimension of the program address elements that form the foundation of the overall training offer, focusing on the vision of the graduate to be shaped, as well as the values and attitudes to be acquired through the curriculum (Prégent, Bernard & Kozanitis, 2009).

**Figure 2: Analytical elements of university language programs**

Hypotheses	Concepts	Dimensions	Indicators
Language programs contain elements of professionalization.	Professionalization of university programs	Structural	Training project (Vision of the graduate, values, and attitudes to be acquired)
Certain knowledge can be developed into practical and professional skills.	Practical and professional skills	Structuring	Competencies to be developed, course distribution, content organization
The relationship between theoretical and practical knowledge is essential for effective professionalization.	Theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge	Structuring	Teaching methods, pedagogical tools, alternation between theory and practice
Programs must be analyzed in terms of their alignment with professional demands.	Program analysis model	Territorial regulation (Giraud, 2009)	Curricular adjustments, partnerships with the professional sector

Source: Established based on the theoretical framework underlying this research (Wittorski, 2012; Barbier, 2011; Prégent, Bernard & Kozanitis, 2009)

For the structuring dimension, the indicators identified within the program-based approach focus on the competencies to be developed, their distribution across courses, as well as the organization of content (specialization field) and pedagogical tools (methods and resources) (Prégent, Bernard & Kozanitis, 2009).

## 2.1. Data and analytical methodology

The French language degree program<sup>1</sup>, structured around its identity sheet, its content (a progression of subjects)<sup>2</sup>, and its human and material resources, was subjected to a qualitative and inductive analysis (Hascoët, Lepareur, Lima, 2024). This analysis aimed to infer (Wittorski, 2007) from coded textual segments, based on the indicators listed in Table 1, in order to extract and link units of meaning closely related to traces of professionalization.

Semantic components were extracted using the MAXQDA software, which offers coding and categorization capabilities for selected textual elements through tools for marking, hierarchical structuring, and visualizing the chosen models and themes. The software also facilitates data processing through various functions, enabling mixed analyses.

The procedure followed using this software involved inputting the degree program file and the course progression file, numbering and coding them according to the following indicators: the training project, the vision for the graduate, the targeted values, the competencies to be developed, their organization and distribution within the program (the principle of coherence) (Prégent, Bernard & Kozanitis, 2009), as well as the theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge (Barbier, 2011) derived from the organization of the content. This categorization, which is broken down into sub-codes corresponding to more specific textual segments, was applied throughout the text of this program based on their alignment with each code mentioned previously. It is important to note that this coding and sub-coding were predetermined, established based on theoretical concepts and explanations integrated into the software, enabling semantic correlations to be drawn in order to identify units of meaning closely linked to the indicators used.

The results obtained from these associations between codes and textual segments (SEG) were converted, using the software, into conceptual maps reflecting thematic and categorical analysis for each indicator retained. The interpretation of these models is conducted according to their relationship with the research question (the traceability of professionalization) and the hypotheses initially formulated, whose concepts are operationalized in Figure 2.

## 2.2. Main results and interpretation

### 2.2.1. A clearly articulated professionalization perspective

The sub-categorization of the theme “educational intention,” which underpins the training project of the French language degree (Figure n°2), has led to several sub-themes linked to textual segments (hereafter referred to as SEG) related to the enhancement and mastery of the French language (SEG3, SEG4, and SEG5). It also includes the introduction to pre-specialization with the goal of pursuing master's studies, providing pathways toward various specializations (SEG7, SEG8, SEG9, SEG10, and SEG11). Additionally, the program aims to prepare students for integration into the workforce, particularly for those unable to pursue a master's degree (SEG12, SEG13), while also promoting mobility and inter-university transfer through a shared common framework (SEG14, SEG15). The program further seeks to ensure students acquire sufficient command of the French language, enabling them to speak, write, and translate it effectively (SEG24, SEG25). The deepening of

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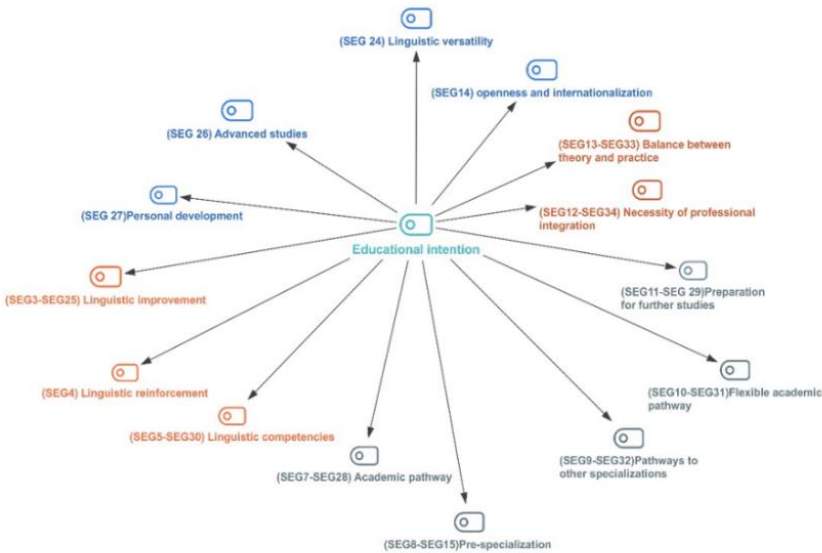
<sup>1</sup> Programs accredited by the supervisory authority under Order No. 584 of July 23, 2014, amending the annex to the Order of July 28, 2013, which establishes the curriculum for the core teachings of the undergraduate program in the field of 'Letters and Foreign Languages

<sup>2</sup> The progression was developed locally by a working group of instructors based on the three-year undergraduate curriculum framework.

knowledge and specialization in the context of advanced studies (master's, doctorate) is also considered (SEG26, SEG27, SEG28, SEG29, SEG30, SEG31, SEG32), as well as integration into employment sectors or socio-professional fields such as education, translation, national and international organizations, tourism, media, and more (SEG33, SEG34).

Thus, this thematic analysis of the segments related to the objectives and competencies of the French language degree program, as well as its potential, clearly highlights a deliberate intention toward professionalization. This dimension is evident in how the program outlines clear pathways for employability (SEG12, SEG13, SEG33, SEG34), despite the stated objectives tied to its academic foundations (SEG7, SEG28). The openness to both academic and professional perspectives is further reinforced by an interdisciplinary and adaptable vision (SEG14, SEG15, SEG10, SEG31), promoting mobility toward other academic pathways, whether within the framework of specialization at the master's and doctoral levels (SEG26, SEG27, SEG28, SEG29, SEG30, SEG31, SEG32) or professional integration (SEG12, SEG34).

This dual vision of the French language degree aligns with the perspective of Lichtenberger and Bouchard (2012: 212), who assert that “all higher education is professional. The opposition between general education and professional education is often artificial and refers more to internal differences in pathways than to the nature of the education itself.” This quotation aptly illustrates the balance between academic and professional objectives that shapes the structure of the French language degree program.



Source: Developed by the author using the MAXQDA software

Figure 3: The educational intent of the french language degree program

### 2.2.2. A versatile balance between civic and professional values

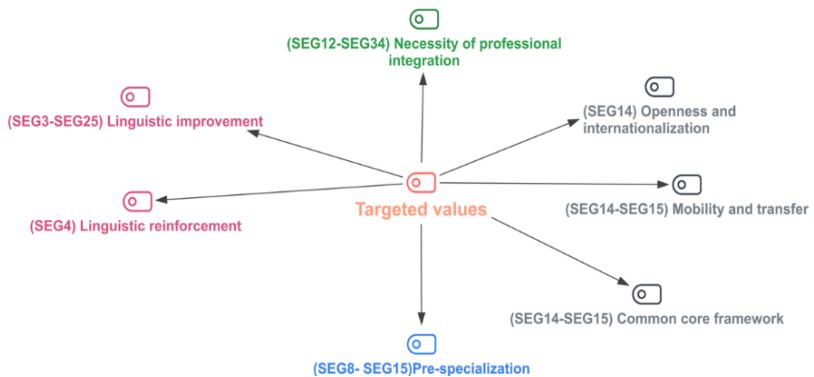
The french language degree program aims to cultivate in students a set of values (Figure 3) and competencies that will be crucial in their development as both citizens and professionals. In our view, these values align with the expectations of the labor market and the demands of contemporary society, where adaptability, linguistic excellence, and open-mindedness are key qualities.

Firstly, the enhancement and mastery of linguistic skills (SEG4, SEG25, SEG23), central to the program's objectives, aim to equip students with strong communication abilities—an essential condition for successful integration into academic and professional environments. This command of the language is not only an asset for employability but also a means of cultural and identity expression, reinforcing the graduate's role as an engaged actor in society.

Secondly, the introduction to pre-specialization (SEG8-SEG15) prepares students for further studies by instilling academic rigor and a spirit of inquiry. This approach fosters intellectual curiosity and autonomy, which are essential for tackling academic challenges and engaging in lifelong learning. Thus, the French language degree prepares graduates to make significant contributions to scientific advancements in the fields of language and literature.

At the same time, preparing students for professional life (SEG12-SEG34) is a central pillar of the program. This preparation emphasizes the development of professional attitudes, such as adaptability and an entrepreneurial spirit. These qualities are fundamental in a constantly evolving labor market, where versatility and the ability to respond to diverse environments are essential. Graduates are therefore trained to meet the demands of the job market, whether in the fields of education, translation, culture, or the creative industries.

Additionally, the program promotes mobility and inter-university transfer (SEG14), fostering open-mindedness and integration into diverse contexts. Based on a common reference framework, the degree enables students to navigate different institutions and educational systems, thus advancing the internationalization of their academic trajectory (SEG14). This aspect of mobility enhances graduates' adaptability and their ability to thrive in multicultural environments.



Source: Developed by the author using the MAXQDA software

**Figure 4: The values targeted by the french language degree program**

In light of these elements, it is clear that the French language degree does not merely produce language experts; it shapes individuals capable of embodying civic values such as commitment, openness, and responsibility. The

professional skills acquired, combined with a solid academic foundation, enable graduates to assert themselves both personally and professionally, thereby contributing to the social, cultural, and economic development of their environment.

### **2.2.3. Articulation between theoretical and practical competencies for professional adaptability**

Despite its clearly established academic focus, the French language degree program demonstrates a structured balance between theory and practice, supporting an adapted form of professionalization. This structure, reflected in the various competencies targeted by the program (Figure 4), highlights both disciplinary and practical/professional skills, which intersect across several domains, with the exception of competencies in ICT (SEG59-63), foreign languages (SEG54-58), research techniques (SEG79-83), and social sciences (SEG50-53). From the outset, these competencies exhibit characteristics of professional skills, as they are applied in research and scientific investigation, utilizing new technologies as well as languages at various stages. This approach does not exclude the use of theoretical or disciplinary foundations to inform these professional applications.

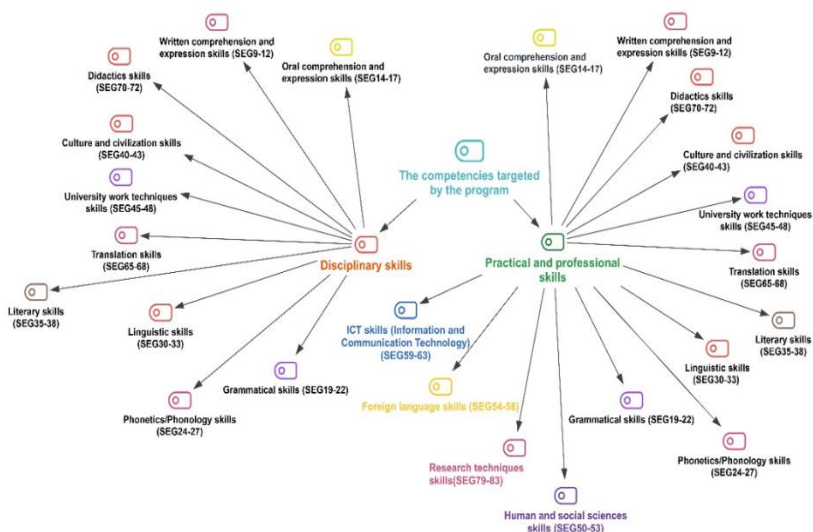
This approach predominates in the analysis of other practical and professional competencies, as they are integrated with disciplinary skills (Figure N°4), reflecting the program's aim to train students not only in theoretical knowledge but also in the ability to apply this knowledge in real professional contexts. Public speaking and argumentation, essential competencies in many professional environments, are developed from disciplinary skills such as "oral comprehension and expression" (SEG14-17) and "literary competencies" (SEG35-38). Through the study of literary texts and oral expression, these competencies enable students to understand and interpret oral and written messages, as well as to structure and organize their oral and written output effectively.

Additionally, writing, a key competency in the professional world, is developed through disciplinary skills such as "written comprehension and expression" (SEG9-12) and "university work techniques" (SEG46-48). This practical skill is directly cultivated through a structured disciplinary learning process related to textual genres and their communicative and pragmatic dimensions. Disciplinary learning also contributes to the development of competencies in "Culture and Civilization" (SEG40-43) and "Literature" (SEG35-38), allowing for critical and reflective analysis of cultural and literary texts. Although the study of these texts is typically considered theoretical, it is applied to reinforce critical skills highly valued in the job market.

Moreover, mastering the practical aspects of linguistics, which stems from an in-depth theoretical study of linguistic trends and modern theories, provides linguistic tools and methodologies for academic work through grammatical competencies (SEG19-22), "corrective and articulatory phonetics" (SEG24-27), and "Linguistics"(SEG30-33), as well as through disciplinary modules related to these competencies. The role of disciplinary knowledge in the

development of professional skills is also evident in translation work (SEG65-68), a specific professional field that requires an understanding of the differences between languages (L1 and L2) and the knowledge and application of translation techniques.

Competencies in “didactics” (SEG70-72), “foreign language (English)”, and “ICT” demonstrate that the ability to apply knowledge in various contexts, particularly in teaching (pedagogical approaches and teaching methodologies in a linguistic context), is a practical skill closely linked to disciplinary competencies. Communication and intercultural skills are also developed from disciplinary competencies in culture and civilization (SEG40-43) through the analysis of cultural and historical concepts and the connections between civilization and texts. Additionally, they are developed through professional competencies in “foreign language (English)” (SEG54-58). This combination once again highlights the importance of integrating theory and practice.



Source: Developed by the author using the MAXQDA software

**Figure 5: The competencies targeted by the french language degree program**

### 2.2.4. The interactive and complementary dynamic between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge

Having previously highlighted the integration of practical and professional skills into disciplinary competencies, the analysis of the french language degree program's content, particularly in terms of the balance between theoretical and practical training (Prégent, Bernard & Kozanitis, 2009), reveals an interactive and complementary dynamic between theoretical knowledge and practical skills (Barbier, 2011).

This dynamic, illustrated by the sub-codes in Figure 4, is evident in studies related to linguistics, pedagogy, social sciences, translation, and other disciplines. It is characterized by the way abstract concepts and theories are applied in practical contexts, thereby transforming knowledge into directly applicable skills.

First, theoretical knowledge in linguistics (Figure 4), such as fundamental concepts, advanced linguistic theories, and complex phenomena, provides the tools necessary for understanding language structures. This knowledge is then translated into practical skills through the analysis of mini-corpora, phonetic transcription, and critical corpus analysis. As a result, this transition from theory to practice enables students to manipulate linguistic tools to solve real-world problems, such as correcting pronunciation and applying combinatory phonetics processes.

Similarly, elements of communication, text types, and discourse adaptation strategies represent theoretical knowledge that is applied in oral and written production. Students use this knowledge to craft structured messages, argue effectively, and participate in debates. Thus, discourse analysis theory serves as a guide for actions such as delivering oral presentations and actively engaging in academic discussions.

In the study of national and foreign languages, linguistic interference phenomena and translation processes are key theoretical concepts for understanding intercultural issues. In practice, these are applied in the translation of texts, adapting translations to cultural contexts, and employing strategies for effective communication in multilingual environments.

Additionally, phonetic and phonological systems, along with combinatory phonetics, are theoretical concepts directly applied to tasks such as orthographic and phonetic transcription and developing auditory skills to identify sound nuances. These practical skills are essential for applications such as language teaching or improving oral communication abilities.

Moreover, the concepts of civilization and culture, along with the analysis of major historical movements, provide a theoretical foundation for understanding the historical and cultural context of literary texts. This theoretical knowledge is transformed into concrete actions when cultural theories are applied to the analysis of civilizational texts, enabling students to develop critical perspectives on historical movements.

In addition, academic work techniques, documentary research, and advanced research methodologies are theoretical skills that take form in note-taking, designing oral and written presentations, and producing academic documents. These practical skills enable students to conduct rigorous research and produce high-quality academic work.

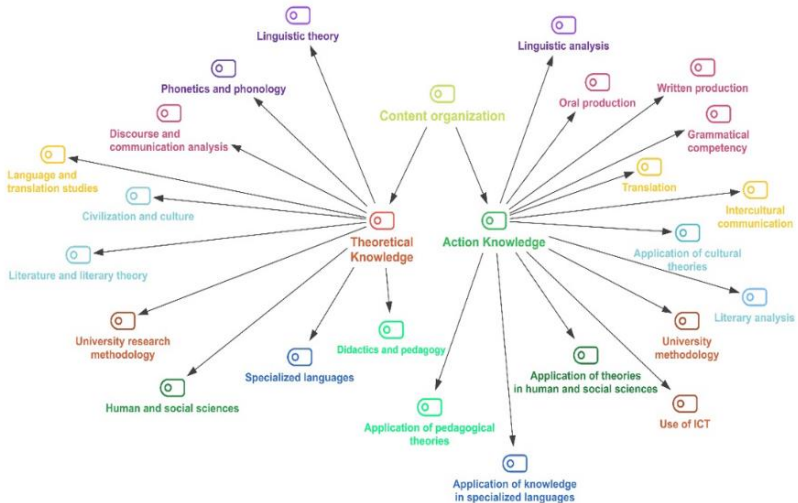
Literary genres, literary trends, and advanced critical theories also represent theoretical knowledge that is applied in the analysis and interpretation of literary texts. By using these theories, students can produce in-depth literary analyses and incorporate complex critical perspectives into their interpretations, thus illustrating the direct relationship between theory and practice.

Additionally, fundamental concepts of psychology and communication sciences, as well as theories in the social sciences, provide a theoretical basis

for analyzing social behaviors and structures. These theoretical concepts are concretely applied when analyzing specific cases, thereby developing interpersonal communication skills and understanding social dynamics.

In the field of pedagogy and didactics, basic pedagogical concepts and teaching methods represent theoretical knowledge that transforms into practical skills through the application of pedagogical theories in teaching simulations. Students use this knowledge to design lessons tailored to learners' needs, thereby demonstrating the integration of pedagogical theories into educational practice.

Finally, the specificities of specialized languages and linguistic requirements in various professional contexts constitute theoretical knowledge applied in concrete tasks such as drafting technical documents. This demonstrates how theoretical knowledge is transformed into practical skills that meet the specific demands of specialized professional fields. Additionally, theoretical knowledge about office tools and operating systems is applied in document writing, digital file management, and creating advanced digital presentations. This practical application of theoretical knowledge highlights the importance of ICT in modern education, enabling students to adapt to complex digital environments.



Source: Developed by the author using the MAXQDA software

## Figure 6: Theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge in the french language degree program

### Conclusion: What curricular adjustments are needed?

In light of the analysis conducted, it is evident that university language programs, particularly the French language degree, demonstrate an intention toward professionalization, although this is still in its embryonic stage. The integration of theoretical and practical skills into the curriculum reflects a clear desire to prepare students for specific professional contexts, while

maintaining a balance between the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge and the development of practical expertise.

However, the analysis revealed a notable absence of practical content that would allow students to develop key professional qualities, such as versatility, in constantly evolving contexts. While fundamental skills, such as public speaking, argumentation, writing, translation, critical and reflective analysis, as well as the application of linguistic theories and corpus analysis techniques, are already addressed, a reinforcement of the practical dimension, in light of interdisciplinary developments, is necessary for students to fully develop these competencies in real-world professional situations.

Thus, to strengthen this interactive dynamic between theory and practice, curricular adjustments are essential. These adjustments should make the programs more flexible and adaptable to better respond to the continuous changes in the labor market and society. Such adjustments should include 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking, collaboration, and digital literacy, which are increasingly demanded in professional environments.

Moreover, it would be beneficial to establish partnerships between universities and socio-economic actors, both at the national and international levels. These collaborations could not only provide students with internship opportunities and pathways to professional integration but also enrich the content of the programs by incorporating real-world challenges encountered in the professional field. This would also facilitate the introduction of intercultural and communication skills that are better aligned with corporate expectations.

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Finally, the analysis revealed that the professionalization of university programs should not come at the expense of intellectual reflection and academic diversity. It is therefore crucial to maintain a balance between the standardization of professional skills and the promotion of a rich and diverse academic education, capable of forming versatile individuals ready to adapt to future challenges.

Future research could focus on evaluating the impact of these curricular adjustments on the employability of graduates, as well as on the adaptation of programs to new labor market demands. A more in-depth investigation of pedagogical strategies that promote the integration of both professional and academic skills would also be desirable to support the professionalization of university language programs.

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