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Soft Skills formation in professional-oriented foreign language education at higher education institutions

Formación de habilidades blandas en la educación de lenguas extranjeras con orientación profesional en instituciones de educación superior

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Abstract

The article aims to analyze the constituent characteristics of soft skills and evaluate students' existing skills and their readiness to receive professionally-oriented foreign language training. General scientific methods of cognition are used for the study, including analysis of foreign investigations, periodicals, and surveys conducted by experts

and scientists. During the study, the requirements of employers to the personnel for the qualities of soft skills in students are determined. The results show that in foreign language teaching, insufficient attention is paid to the education of these qualities. The study results are of great importance for the higher education teachers forming methodological developments in fostering these soft skills among students.

Keywords: soft skills, flexible skills, social skills, quality of higher education, competence, employability.

Resumen

El artículo tiene como objetivo analizar las características constitutivas de las habilidades blandas y evaluar las habilidades existentes de los estudiantes y su preparación para recibir formación en idiomas extranjeros con orientación profesional. Para el estudio se utilizan métodos científicos generales de cognición, incluido el análisis de investigaciones extranjeras, publicaciones periódicas y encuestas realizadas por expertos y científicos. Durante el estudio se determinan los requerimientos de los empleadores al personal por las cualidades de soft skills en los estudiantes. Los resultados muestran que en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras no se presta suficiente atención a la educación de estas cualidades. Los resultados del estudio son de gran importancia para los docentes de educación superior que forman desarrollos metodológicos en el fomento de estas habilidades blandas entre los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: habilidades blandas, habilidades flexibles, habilidades sociales, calidad de la educación superior, competencia, empleabilidad.

1. Introduction

Many foreign and domestic higher education institutions practice foreign language learning during professionally-oriented education that enables students to successfully master and practice soft skills (British Council, 2021), (Glazunova, Kuzminska, Voloshyna, Sayapina & Korolchuk, 2017).

In the context of educational internationalization and globalization, soft skills are the main factor for successful employment, academic activities, and work.

The purpose of learning a foreign language during career-oriented learning is to master the foreign language and the basics of oral and written communication to apply it in informational and communicative activities. Also, professionally-oriented foreign language education is aimed at mastering oral and written communication to acquire professional and general cultural competencies.

To date, the educational level of students at various grades cannot be called satisfactory. The reason is that in the learning process, teachers emphasize grammar study, while the

other skills are not developed. A new approach to the educational process for specialists is needed to solve this problem. It is especially true for non-linguistic students studying at economic, technical, and other faculties, who need to negotiate, analyze data and generate reports for foreign companies. To develop knowledge of foreign language grammar and, at the same time, communicative abilities, it is necessary to create effective methods and ways of organizing the learning process (Khiminytsia & Martyniuk, 2020).

The development of soft skills competencies is quite a hot topic that many specialists discuss: teachers of foreign universities, HR managers, and management consultants. They share their suggestions in personal blogs and on the websites of educational institutions (British Council, 2021). As a result, not only theoretical pedagogical bases are being actively developed, but also practical ones, which are based on the successful experience gained during the study of English in different universities of the world.

However, it should be noted that there are not enough practical solutions for developing soft skills. We can find some theoretical and practical teaching methodology suggestions in the articles and publications of Z. Esmurzaeva, O. Novikova, S. Shylova and others. But currently, there is not enough research, as it does not allow getting a complete understanding of the nature and specificity of soft skills and how they can affect the educational process (Esmurzaeva & Novykova, 2019), (Shylova, 2017).

2. Literature review

The term "soft skills" was first used in scientific research by American and German management specialists. It appeared in their works in the 1990s, and a little later, it began to be used in business and education (Scaffidi, 2018).

Researchers interpret the term "soft skills" in different ways. However, the definition offered by K.A. Koval, K.I. Perez Maya, I. Yasna, etc is the most complete. According to it, "soft skills" is a successful interaction with the environment due to acquiring special or universal competencies. As a result, their owner can work in a team, think critically, solve complex problems, make quick decisions, etc. (Drozdova & Dubinina, 2020), (Guerra-Báez, 2021).

The development of "soft skills" competencies is essential for future employment and specialists' career growth. This opinion is expressed by K. Koval, S. Nahod and I. Garbuziuk. Consequently, the interest in this topic is constantly growing, confirmed by the scientific works of T. Litvin, A. Kravets, A. Kurakin, A. Bezus, etc. (Tymoschuk, 2021).

To date, one of the topical issues is the development of "soft skills." In modern science, the definition is defined as a set of professional and non-professional talents required for a specialist to work successfully and increase productivity. A soft skills owner must be communicative, competent, be able to work with people and distribute his time rationally. Also, he must have leadership qualities. It should be noted that each researcher defines the term "soft skills" based on their field of work. However, the same qualities that

employees with soft skills should have in different spheres indicate the universality of this concept (Tilikina, 2020).

According to A. Ivonina, O. Chulanova, & Yu. Davletshyna, soft skills are a set of competencies necessary for interaction between people: negotiation skills, time management, leadership, and the ability to persuade (Ivonina, Chulanova & Davletshyna, 2017).

The necessity of all these competencies for the successful work of a future specialist is confirmed by O. Tapygina He gives them the ability to defend opinions and ideas and coordinate their actions with others. Thus, he focuses on the emotional qualities necessary for interaction with people (Tapygina, 2018).

There is an opinion that the term "soft skills" is used to describe Emotional Intelligence Quotient (EQ) - the ability to control and manage one's emotions, being aware of them and feeling them. It should be noted that having soft skills helps in employment. They effectively complement the professional qualities of the job seeker (Berkovich, Kofanova & Tikhonova, 2018). V. Davydova confirms the fact that employers value soft skills. By this concept, she means the person's abilities acquired from life experience and training (Davydova, 2021). Virtually every definition of soft skills includes a communicative component for learning a foreign language (Kurinna, 2019).

In order to implement the classification of "soft skills" for the Single European Economic Space, a number of documents were adopted by the EU countries. Consultations on investing in improving and enhancing these skills have also been held. In 2018, EU member states adopted 11 directives to develop soft skills for European university students. Entirely new teaching methods have been developed for their implementation. A significant achievement in soft skills development was the adoption of the European Skills, Competences, Qualifications, and Occupations (ESCO) declaration, which offers their classification. It includes 1384 skills that are relevant to the modern labor market. Most of them are related to creativity, communication, and effective thinking.

According to some researchers, the phenomenon of soft skills lies in the difficulty of achieving and modifying them, which is confirmed by trends in education and the labor market in many countries - Australia, North America, China, and Malaysia, etc.

This phenomenon has been studied by leading research centers in the United States. As a result of the study of this phenomenon, scientists have identified the main types of soft skills:

1. Social (ability to communicate with people, empathy, concentration, cultural and multicultural competence).
2. Mental (creativity, quick problem solving, interdisciplinary thinking).
3. Organizational (ability to work in a team, presentation skills).

4. Personal (responsibility, self-confidence, flexibility, emotional stability, composure) (Business Soft Skills durch Fremdsprachen, 2020).

In the process of learning a foreign language, the most valuable skills will be soft skills 4C: Critical Thinking, Critical Thinking, Collaboration, and Communication. Several effective methods allow integration into the process of foreign language learning. One of the most effective is the communicative method. In order to develop communicative skills, which means to form the student's speech activity according to the situation, they must think independently and solve the set tasks. For this purpose, it is recommended to conduct research, write reports, and projects, organize public speeches using discussions, debates, and various verbal means of communication. The development of communicative skills is facilitated by the use of various verbal communication forms. They may include negotiations, interviews, case studies, etc. The teacher's interaction with the student is important in developing "soft skills." It has undergone severe changes in recent years. Today traditional forms of interaction are not widespread, which cannot be said about e-learning, m-learning, social learning, and game development.

The forms of interaction between teachers and students are chosen depending on the trends in education. Such trends include:

- Knowledge creation instead of knowledge transfer;
- Teacher-student interaction, collaboration, and teamwork instead of the traditional teacher-student knowledge transfer model;
- Cross-functional learning instead of narrow specialization learning;
- The use of different learning modes. Rotating classroom instruction, distance learning, practicum, and simulation is also necessary. The use of all these forms will contribute to the consolidation of professional competencies and soft skills.

Within a single year, the proportion of new skills that are produced around the world increases by 27%. That's the data from a study by the World Economic Forum. Automation, which has led to the loss of millions of jobs, is contributing to this. People who have lost their jobs are forced to retrain. It is the only way they can stay competitive in the labor market (World Economic Forum, 2020). Due to this situation, new educational trends are developing, the strategic goals of education are changing, and there is a transition to innovative learning methods.

According to World Economic Forum statistics, the most important skills in 2022 are:

- creativity;
- ability to think holistically;
- leadership;
- interaction with people;
- emotional intelligence;
- self-confidence;

- decision-making skills;
- ability to negotiate;
- flexibility;
- customer orientation.

Based on this, we can say that in recent years preference has been given to Soft skills. At the same time, "hard" (professional skills) are receding into the background, although they are also considered when hiring (World Economic Forum, 2020). Thus, by having "soft skills", the future specialist can build a career and achieve success in the workplace.

It should be noted that soft skills are equally necessary for work and everyday life. Most of them are used to achieve goals in other areas. "Soft" or "social skills" are paramount when a person climbs the career ladder. That is because the number of employees in person's subordination increases. There is an increase in the number of consultations on various issues, which requires appropriate competencies (European Dictionary of Skills and Competences, 2020).

Considering the above, it is possible to say that a professional specialist should work on the constant development of soft skills. For this purpose, he can attend various courses and training and use other interactive and distance learning forms. Only in this way it's possible to achieve success in the sphere of activity (Capretz & Ahmed, 2018).

The development of soft skills is an essential part of the educational program of many domestic and foreign universities because their presence is a fundamental requirement of most employers. Interactive teaching methods are used to study a foreign language to create communicative situations close to natural working conditions. Thanks to this, the future expert is much easier to adapt to the new workplace.

Thus, a specialist's personal and professional development requires the acquisition of soft skills. At the same time, the development of specific soft skills and the extent of modern employers' needs for specialists with such skills remain insufficiently studied.

Objectives. The study aims to determine the need for developing soft skills competencies for university students to analyze the features of this process while studying a foreign language.

3. Materials and methods

The first part of the study considers the proportion of new skills developed by 2022 in the global market. Then, the trends that are observed in need of new skills are evaluated based on statistical data from the World Economic Forum 2020.

The second part of the study is based on a questionnaire survey of students, managers of universities, and companies. A test of L. Thurston Zamfir, modified by A. Rean, was

used to determine the level of soft skills (Kmentová, Cruz-Laufer, Pariselle & Smeets, 2022).

Analytical and synthetic methods were used to define "soft skills" and study their characteristics. Among other methods used to conduct the study, it is necessary to note the comparative method, the method of analogy, the method of classification, and the method of systematization and generalization (Cornalli, 2018).

Results.

With the aim of the empirical study of employers' requirements and their level of satisfaction by graduates, we conducted a questionnaire survey among applicants, businesses, and heads of educational institutions. All participants of the survey are residents of Ukraine. Based on the results of the survey, we received 30 responses from business applicants, which showed that the most needed soft skills over the next five years are:

- problem-solving ability;
- data processing;
- negotiating;
- flexibility.

In order to meet these demands with employees, they must:

- Be responsible and focused, work for results;
- have contextual thinking that allows them to analyze and synthesize information;
- develop communicative skills, have sufficiently developed emotional intelligence, which allows you to feel the interlocutor and respond to requests, requests or suggestions in a relevant way;
- be able to predict future events based on experience, and quickly adapt to a changing environment.

The respondents' answers in Figure 1 show the importance of each characteristic.

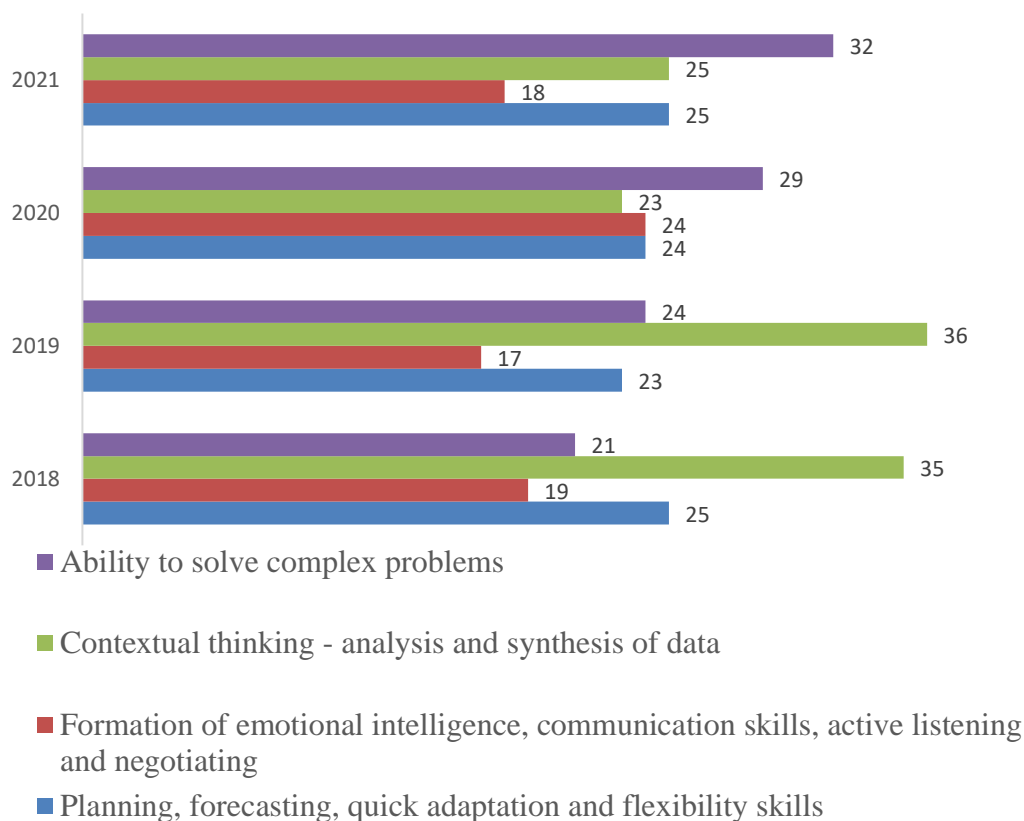


Figure 1. The most required soft skills characteristics for personnel (from the point of view of international company managers, %)

According to the figure, the essential skill for employers in 2021 is the ability to data analysis. However, even though the requirement for this skill is decreasing, there is still a lack of specialists in the labor market who have analytical thinking.

The demand for networking and forecasting skills is relatively stable. However, the demand for specialists who can solve complex problems is overgrowing. For example, while the importance of this skill was 21% in 2018, by 2021, one-third of employers consider this skill to be one of the essentials.

In order to meet employers' demands, the labor market must produce professionals who meet the needs. Higher education institutions are responsible for training specialists, so their response to the opportunity to meet market demand is also essential. We obtained it through a survey of the heads of higher education institutions that train specialists in linguistics. The results of data processing are shown in Fig.2.

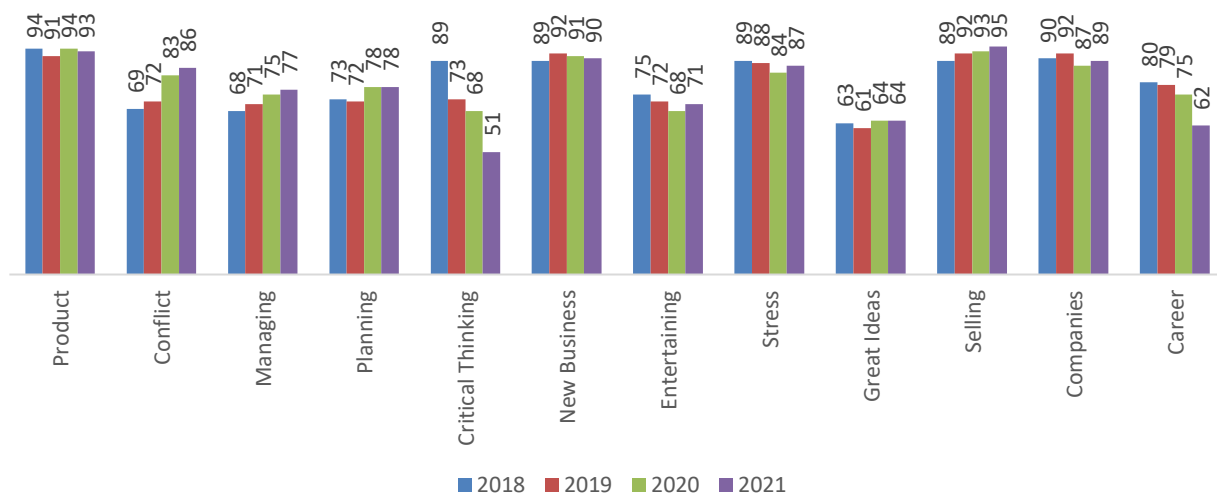


Figure 2. Methodological, technical and staff capacities of teachers to develop soft-skills for linguistic students
(In terms of university managers)

According to the survey of higher education executives, graduates have good product and communication skills. However, the personal skills indicator for starting a business and increasing sales is slightly lower. It is important to note that higher education institutions cannot realize the possibility of training specialists with critical thinking or workers who can generate ideas. In order for a worker to have such skills, he must acquire them outside the higher education institution.

The results of the survey of university leaders in Ukraine confirm the report of the World Economic Forum 2020. According to this report, the top 10 key competencies in the labor market form:

- analytical thinking and innovativeness;
- ability to learn quickly;
- the ability for complex problem solving;
- analytical and critical thinking;
- initiative and creativity;
- leadership qualities;
- implementation and control of new technologies;
- technological design and programming;
- stress tolerance and adaptability;
- logical, consistent thinking.

According to the results of the study of theoretical scientific literature, it can be concluded that there is not enough research on the nature of soft skills. In this regard, there are not enough methodological and practical recommendations for the organization of the

educational process. Thus, we have developed criteria that allow us to evaluate the effectiveness of traditional and non-traditional methods of soft skills formation.

To begin with, we determined the significance level of all the criteria and gave them a score. As a result, we obtained the average score and the final result based on the average value. The result of the research is shown in figure 3.

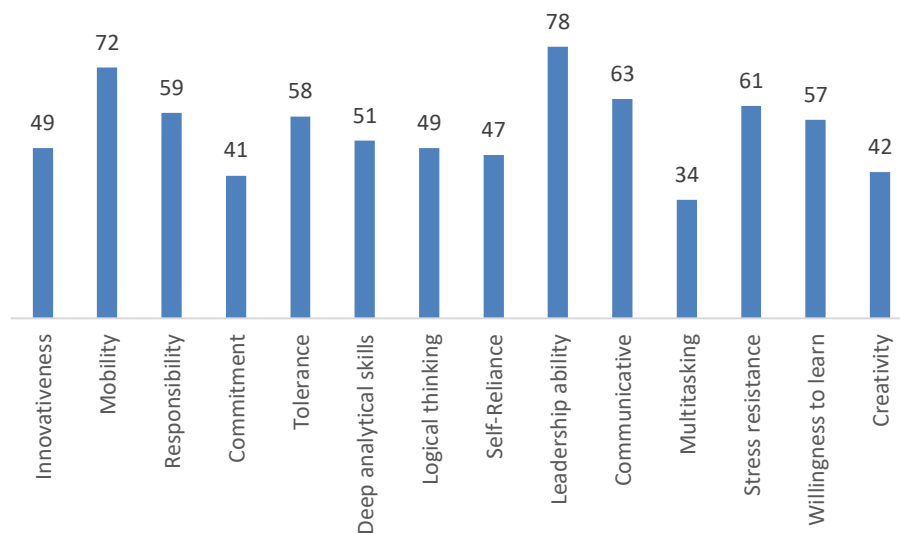


Figure 3. Students' soft skills level in teaching a foreign language (based on the results of the university survey, %)

According to the data processing results, students understand that soft skills are considered to be more in demand in the labor market today, which can be even more privileged than special professional skills. But, at the same time, the skills that graduates receive in higher education do not meet the needs of company managers.

4. Discussion

Many employers consider soft skills as important as professional skills, especially in professions where knowledge needs to be updated regularly, such as law, accounting, design, IT, etc. O. Chulanova and O. Bogdan researched 16 European countries and found that 93% of employers consider soft skills more important than professional skills (Chulanova & Bogdan, 2020). The study found that educational institutions, during the training of professionals, need to pay attention to:

- the ability to form effective communications, which comes with the ability to listen actively, keep the conversation going, and ask in the right tone;
- the ability to solve complex or important problems, as most novices tend to step away from complex tasks and pass them on to more experienced professionals.

Similar results were confirmed by the heads of international universities in Ukraine, who showed that students' critical thinking skills are pretty weak. Also, students cannot initiate ideas in business development or improve their work.

Studies show that linguistic students' soft skills are developed differently. The range of development is quite extensive, from 34% to 78%. However, the average figure is 54%. Under the same conditions, specialists with high and low soft skills can be formed. It means that to a greater extent, the acquisition of these qualities depends not on the university or its program but on the student's characteristics, which they form in the family or their living environment.

It is also necessary to underline that the question of soft skills development is urgent not only in Ukraine. It is a problem in the developed world community, where developed business structures require the formation of effective teams.

We can conclude that for a linguistic student to meet the market's requirements, they should develop soft skills within the program of study at the university and independently, using other methods. At the same time, it is not so easy to solve the problem of improving soft skills training at the university. The thing is that unlike professional skills, which can be assessed and monitored, it is pretty challenging to evaluate personal qualities according to a standard methodology or scale. Similarly, it is impossible to determine the level of possession of personal qualities at work. While qualification requirements can be described in job descriptions, soft requirements can only be described as a whole, with no specific indicators for each characteristic. The assessment of a specialist's personal abilities is often subjective, which makes the assessment incorrect.

Educational institutions can use these analytics to identify academic programs' weaknesses and to create methodological recommendations for developing soft skills among language students.

5. Conclusions

In the conditions of developed markets and business structures, the need for specialists with advanced soft skills is growing. The problem is also relevant to the Ukrainian labor market, where managers feel the lack of young professionals capable of making responsible decisions, solving problems, developing and maintaining business processes after graduation.

Studies have shown that for employers, the presence of soft skills is not only considered basic but an immediate need. The main characteristics are readiness for communication and negotiation, transfer of business from one direction to another, self-development, fast learning, emotion management, ability to cope with stress, anticipate and reduce risks, flexibility, creativity, critical and rational thinking.

Mastery of such characteristics allows the student to successfully find employment and strengthen their competitive qualities in the labor market. The development of soft skills needs to use interactive teaching methods, which allow within the framework of business games and simulations to sharpen the qualities and be ready for market demands.

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