
THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF DEVELOPING “SOFT SKILLS” IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Annotation

This article examines the necessity of developing the conceptual foundations of a system for improving “soft skills” in English language teaching in non-philological areas of higher education. The study emphasizes that English language instruction has significant potential not only for developing linguistic competence, but also for strengthening students’ communicative, self-management and cognitive skills. The article analyzes the current lack of systematic integration of “soft skills” into higher education, particularly in the preparation of Economics students. Special attention is paid to the insufficient methodological connection between English language learning, independent education, professional communication and reflective assessment. The study also highlights the absence of standardized criteria and descriptors for evaluating the development of “soft skills” among students. Based on the analysis of international theories and concepts, including experiential learning, the zone of proximal development, social learning, reflective practice, agile pedagogy and the T-shaped professional model, the article substantiates the need for a scientifically grounded, integrative and gradually implemented conceptual-methodological model. The proposed approach aims to organize the development of “soft skills” as a purposeful, methodologically coherent and diagnostically measurable process within English language teaching.

Keywords

soft skills, English language teaching, non-philological education, Economics students, transversal skills, communicative competence, self-management, cognitive skills, independent learning, conceptual model, assessment descriptors, higher education.

Introduction. Based on our researches, it can be stated that the English language course possesses a specific potential for improving students’ transversal skills that is not commonly observed in other subject areas. In the modern

educational process, where students are required to develop not only theoretical knowledge but also professional and personal competencies – “soft skills” – English language teaching can serve not only as a means of developing linguistic knowledge, but also as a favorable platform for strengthening communicative, self-management and cognitive skills. Therefore, the development of the conceptual foundations of a system for improving “soft skills” in English language teaching in non-philological areas of higher education is of particular importance. The need to develop the conceptual foundations of a system for improving “soft skills” in English language teaching can be explained by the following factors.

Literature review. First, the process of developing “soft skills” in the higher education system has not yet been sufficiently systematized. According to I.A. Zimnyaya, competencies constitute an integral psychological structure, and it is ineffective to form them separately from one another. However, in practice, the components of “soft skills” are often formed episodically within separate lessons, and in the best cases, within individual subjects or short-term training sessions. In such an approach, skills are not directed toward a unified pedagogical goal, and no internal logical connection is ensured among them.

This situation, as noted by V.I. Baydenko, leads to the fragmentary formation of competencies and, as a result, prevents them from transforming into a stable and integral professional competence in the graduate’s future professional activity. In the case of Economics students, this lack of systematicity creates a gap between their subject-specific knowledge and their communicative or cognitive abilities. A student may possess excellent knowledge of theoretical calculations, yet experience difficulties in defending them within a team or in making responsible decisions in uncertain economic situations.

As Nobel Prize laureate J. Heckman emphasizes in his research, non-cognitive skills must develop in a hierarchically interconnected manner; otherwise, the learner’s personal effectiveness remains low. Hierarchy refers to a system in which lower-level elements serve as the basis for higher-level elements. In Heckman’s theory, this means that a person cannot acquire complex strategic skills without first developing fundamental basic skills. This may be illustrated through the image of a building. The foundation consists of goal setting, proper time management and emotional stability or self-control; the walls represent cooperation and communication; and the roof symbolizes leadership and initiative. If there is no foundation – goal setting and proper time management – the roof, that is, leadership and initiative, will collapse by itself. In other words, it is extremely

difficult for a person who cannot manage his or her emotions at a lower hierarchical level to manage a team at a higher hierarchical level.

Second, the purposeful integration of “soft skills” into the English language teaching process has not been sufficiently ensured. In current pedagogical practice, priority is usually given to linguistic competencies such as grammar, phonetics and vocabulary, while socio-communicative and personal development skills often remain outside the main objective of the lesson and are treated only as secondary tasks.

As Charles Fadel, an international expert in curriculum modernization, emphasizes, in modern education, content and skills should not be taught separately; rather, the language teaching process should function as a “contextual framework” that serves to develop students’ critical thinking and adaptability. Continuing this idea in the context of economic education, J. Heckman and T. Kautz criticize the “academic centralization” of the education system and particularly emphasize the need for the intentional integration of cross-sectoral skills that determine a person’s social success into curricula.

According to Andrews, the “skills gap” in higher education emerges precisely because these skills are not systematically integrated into the curriculum and because there is a lack of logical consistency. Consequently, the improvement of “soft skills” in English language classes should not be regarded as an additional activity, but as a process that must be implemented on the basis of a logically structured conceptual-methodological model that ensures the student’s professional identification.

It can also be stated that the problem is further deepened by the fact that the process of independent learning, which occupies an important place in the contemporary higher education system, is not methodologically connected with these skills. As Zimmerman states, independent learning is not merely work performed outside the classroom, but a metacognitive activity. According to the scholar, no knowledge can become stable unless students learn to set goals, achieve them, manage their time and analyze their own results in the process of independent learning.

Nilson, who conducted research on the content of independent learning, substantiates the need to change the content of independent learning in higher education. According to her concept of “Self-Focused Learning,” students should not only be assigned tasks that require searching for information, but also tasks that require reflection and self-analysis. HEMIS, or the Higher Education Management Information System, and Moodle, or Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning

Environment, have been introduced in almost all higher educational institutions of the Republic. Independent learning assignments are uploaded to and assessed through these systems. Although this ensures transparency, in many cases there is a lack of feedback between the student and the teacher. The student uploads the assignment but does not engage in reflective work on his or her mistakes.

Based on observations of the educational process, surveys conducted on the topic and relevant analyses, it can be seen that independent work in higher education in Uzbekistan is currently aimed mainly at strengthening subject-specific knowledge, or hard skills. An Economics student studies economic theory as part of independent work, but components such as discussing it in English within a team, providing solutions on the basis of ethical reasoning, or analyzing economic risks through critical thinking are not purposefully included in the structure of assignments.

Moreover, in our country, the effectiveness of independent learning remains largely dependent on the teacher's ability to act as a facilitator and guide. Since many students come from school education accustomed to receiving ready-made knowledge, they often lack self-management skills in independent learning. In this regard, as local researchers such as A.A. Khodjayev emphasize, it is impossible to improve the quality of independent learning without developing a culture of independent learning among students.

Research Methodology. The study employed comparative analysis, monographic research, comparison, statistical grouping, and socio-economic analysis methods.

Analysis and Results. The levels of students' "soft skills" development have not been scientifically determined, and the assessment system has not been standardized. At present, the stages of formation of these skills among students, the mechanism of their development and the criteria for monitoring them have not been sufficiently developed. This significantly limits the possibility of objectively assessing educational outcomes and conducting pedagogical analysis.

As V.A. Adolf and I.Yu. Stepanova note, the absence of clear indicators in assessing personal qualities such as "soft skills" leads to reliance on the teacher's subjective judgments, which in turn disrupts the mechanism of quality control in education. L.Lippman and her co-authors, who analyzed this problem at the international level, emphasize that the main difficulty in measuring "soft skills" lies in the intangible nature of these skills, and that their assessment requires not only traditional tests but also multidimensional assessment tools.

In this regard, due to the lack of standardized assessment criteria and indicators, the process is often carried out on the basis of general descriptions. M. Yorke and P. Knight, in their employability model, proved that the absence of a coherent measurement system for assessing skills also hinders the development of students' self-assessment skills. In the case of Economics students, the fact that their socio-professional growth is not reflected in numbers or specific levels – for example, low, medium and high – leads to a decrease in motivation and a reduction in responsibility toward independent learning. Consequently, as B.X. Xodjayev emphasizes, the effectiveness of any pedagogical innovation is determined by its diagnostic nature, that is, by the possibility of measuring results on the basis of clear criteria. This, in turn, requires the development of stages of development for each component of “soft skills,” competence descriptors and standardized assessment criteria.

Furthermore, the pedagogical and methodological system has not been fully formed. This is manifested primarily in the insufficient use of an individual approach in the educational process, the episodic nature of active and interactive methods, and the lack of practical or professional orientation in textbooks and teaching materials. As the well-known pedagogue Jeremy Harmer emphasizes, if educational materials are not adapted to students' real-life and professional needs, the language learning process is reduced merely to the completion of linguistic exercises. This leads to the failure of language competence to develop in communicative and functional terms, to the inability to apply acquired knowledge in real professional situations, and to a decrease in students' motivation. As a result, the educational process remains within a theoretical-linguistic framework, and practical-professional effectiveness is not ensured.

At the same time, the level of use of digital resources and interactive platforms remains insufficient. In her concept of “E-moderating,” G. Salmon substantiates that the digital environment should serve not only as a source of information, but also as a key space for developing students' “soft skills,” such as collaboration and digital literacy.

Among scholars of our republic, N.N. Azizkhodjayeva emphasizes that the effectiveness of pedagogical technologies is directly related to the level of interactivity between the student and the teacher. This interactivity should not merely be viewed as a form of communication; rather, it should also perform a diagnostic function in managing the quality of the educational process. However, in practice, the opportunities for feedback and self-assessment, which are important components of such interactive communication, remain limited. Such a gap in the

educational process does not allow educational outcomes to be observed objectively. In this regard, John Hattie, in his large-scale research on *Visible Learning*, proved that high-quality feedback is one of the strongest factors increasing educational effectiveness; its absence or insufficient organization causes the pedagogical process to remain “invisible” and become unmanageable. Consequently, the principle of interactivity advanced by Azizkhodjayeva should find its full practical expression through the mechanism of effective feedback in Hattie’s theory. In particular, English language textbooks for Economics students do not sufficiently provide project work, case studies and team simulations aimed at developing “soft skills.” This causes students to face not only language barriers, but also problems of professional communication and social adaptation.

In addition, students’ motivation is low, and their personal responsibility in the process of independent learning has not been sufficiently formed. This factor appears as a pedagogical barrier that significantly reduces the overall effectiveness of the process of developing “soft skills.” As the well-known motivation theorists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan emphasize in their Self-Determination Theory, if a learner lacks intrinsic motivation and autonomy, he or she demonstrates passivity in mastering complex social skills . In the case of Economics students, if they perceive assignments in English classes merely as a means of obtaining a grade or as an obligation, volitional qualities such as professional adaptability and teamwork will not be formed.

As the Russian scholar I.A. Zimnyaya notes, the student’s subjective activity in the educational process contributes not only to the acquisition of knowledge, but also to his or her development as a person; the absence of responsibility disrupts the integrity of competencies. Zimmerman logically develops this problem in his models of independent learning, proving that the student’s failure to assume responsibility for his or her own learning activity, or lack of self-regulation, renders any methodological innovation ineffective.

It follows that the creation of special conceptual mechanisms aimed at developing stable motivation for independent learning among students and increasing their responsibility in this process is one of the important tasks of the present day. Indeed, only an activity that is consciously accepted and performed with personal responsibility can serve as the foundation for stable “soft skills.”

Although global scholarship does not reveal concepts specifically devoted to the improvement of “soft skills” as such, there exist theories and concepts developed by scholars from various countries, including the CIS, that are close in essence and are aimed at developing similar skills among learners. The content,

essence and mechanisms of these theories and concepts differ from one another in various respects, as shown in the following table.

Author and concept	Main content	Mechanism of development
David Kolb: Experiential Learning Theory	A skill is formed through direct personal experience and its subsequent processing.	The process consists of a four-stage cycle: Concrete experience – the student encounters a problem situation; Reflective observation – the student analyzes what has happened; Theoretical conclusion – the student draws conclusions and develops a new strategy; Practical experimentation – the student tests the new strategy in practice.
Lev Vygotsky: Zone of Proximal Development	Skills develop in a social environment through the collaborative performance of more complex tasks.	Scaffolding: the student expands his or her boundaries by completing a task that cannot be performed independently but can be performed with the help of a teacher or peer.
Albert Bandura: Social Learning Theory	Human behavior and life skills are improved through observing others.	Modeling: Attention → Retention → Reproduction → Motivation. The learner imitates exemplary behavior and internalizes it.
Donald Schön: Reflective Practitioner Theory	Professional mastery, including “soft skills,” is refined through continuous reflection on activity.	Reflection-in-action: correcting mistakes and changing strategy during the process itself, for example during negotiation. This increases the flexibility of the skill.
T. Hodgson and L. Burke: Agile Pedagogy	The Agile management approach used in business is transferred to education and skills transfer.	“Sprint” and “Scrum” teams: the learning process is divided into short-term team projects, and communication is improved through rapid feedback at the end of each sprint.
D.G. Sampson: Life-Ready Graduate	“Soft skills” are transformed into visible, measurable and certifiable digital assets.	Digital badges: education is divided into small modules, and when each “soft skill” is mastered, the student receives a digital badge, thereby creating a “Skills Passport” or e-portfolio.
H. Spowart: Integrated Concept of the T-Shaped Professional	The profile of a specialist is synthesized through vertical knowledge and horizontal skills.	“Soft skills” are formed in any professional environment, mainly through cooperation in the workplace or joint projects. According to this concept, the type of environment or subject is not decisive; what matters is the existence of a communicative

Author and concept	Main content	Mechanism of development
		space.

Comparative Analysis of Concepts Related to the Development of "Soft Skills"

The results of the above analysis show that there is no unified systematic approach to the development of "soft skills" through practical classes and independent learning in the process of English language teaching. Therefore, there arises a need to develop a scientifically grounded, integrative and gradually implemented conceptual model. The proposed concept should make it possible to organize the development of "soft skills" as a purposeful, methodologically coherent system supplied with assessment mechanisms.

Conclusion. The study reveals that one of the main problems is the absence of a unified methodological system for developing "soft skills" through practical classes and independent learning. Independent education is often limited to strengthening subject-specific knowledge, whereas activities aimed at teamwork, critical thinking, ethical reasoning, reflection and professional communication are not sufficiently included in students' learning tasks. This weakens the connection between language learning and future professional activity.

Another important issue is the lack of standardized assessment criteria, indicators and descriptors for measuring the level of students' "soft skills" development. Without clear diagnostic tools, the evaluation of such skills tends to rely on general descriptions or subjective judgments. Therefore, the development of measurable descriptors and assessment mechanisms is essential for monitoring students' progress and ensuring the effectiveness of pedagogical innovations.

The comparative analysis of international concepts related to skills development demonstrates that various theories – including experiential learning, social learning, reflective practice, scaffolding, agile pedagogy and the T-shaped professional model – provide valuable methodological foundations. However, these approaches have not yet been integrated into a unified system specifically aimed at developing "soft skills" through English language teaching.

Thus, the findings of the article confirm the necessity of developing an integrative conceptual-methodological model that connects English language instruction, professional context, independent learning, interactive methods, reflection and assessment mechanisms. Such a model will make it possible to organize the development of "soft skills" as a purposeful, gradual, measurable and professionally oriented process. This, in turn, will contribute to preparing

graduates who are not only linguistically competent, but also communicatively active, socially adaptable, self-directed and capable of effective professional interaction.

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