



Development and Implementation of Soft Skills in English Lessons During Online Teaching

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Soft skills are important in the life of each individual and affect their success in personal and professional life. Experts point out that soft skills are often more important than hard ones. The concept of soft skills covers a wide range of skills, personality traits and competencies. These are manifested in relation to oneself and other people and thanks to them one works effectively in various social situations [1]. Their definition and classification varies depending on the authors' point of view. In general, soft skills are divided into categories based on their nature: personal skills, social skills and professional and situational skills. In the school environment, each subject offers opportunities to develop them. In connection with the pandemic, teaching has moved to online space. This change had an impact on all aspects of the teacher's and learner's work and also affected the development of soft skills. The aim of our article is to identify which soft skills have come to the forefront of teachers' interest as nature of online teaching primarily required them and enabled their development. Our interest also lies in identifying those skills that have remained unchanged compared to in-class teaching and which could not be developed more intensively during online teaching. To achieve our aim, a group interview will be set up to find out the perception of the importance of selected soft skills among teachers of lower secondary education.

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Key words: *soft skills, online/in-class classes, interpersonal/intrapersonal skills, methods*

Introduction

The global development of the learner's personality is the goal of every society. For a fulfilling life, an individual needs to have opportunities to develop not only hard but also soft skills. In the 21st century, soft skills are an important aspect of success not only in career but also in the personal sphere, especially in building interpersonal relationships, personal development and achieving self-satisfaction. For this reason, the development of soft skills should also be included in every subject in lower secondary education, not excluding English. The pandemic has caused both learners and teachers to be exposed to stress and the transition to online teaching has meant that everyone has had to cope with an unfamiliar reality and adapt to new situations. According to psychologists, stressful situations create the space to develop particularly soft skills.

1.1 Characteristics of soft skills

In general, we divide skills into soft and hard skills. Hard skills include those that are learnable, measurable and can be assessed. Thus, they are knowledge that is subject-specific in nature and can be referred to as a person's know-how. On the other hand, soft skills are trans-subject in nature and need to be developed through various methods and techniques. There is no single definition of soft skills but in general, they include a person's behaviour, personality traits and attitudes, communication skills, social skills, and emotional intelligence [4]. Hence, soft skills belong to many areas such as communication, empathy, motivation, self-management, etc. Due to their subjectivity, it is difficult to assess or measure them.

Several authors have characterised soft skills as mental abilities that enable us to cope not only with people and their behaviour, but also with ourselves. They can be compared to social competences, such as cooperation, communication, conflict management and others [2]. In view of the diversity of categorization and the plurality of opinions, we have narrowed down the number of soft skills and focused on those that are relevant for 10-15 year olds and can be developed in both in-class and online English classes. We will focus on two groups of soft skills, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills.



1.2 Interpersonal skills

The prerequisite for developing interpersonal skills is cooperation and interpersonal interaction which are acquired and used in interaction with other people. Considering the age group, we will focus on interaction with classmates and the teacher during instruction.

Communication skills

The ability to communicate is one of the most important skills and is the foundation for other skills. It enables the learner to react promptly and solve different problems. Interpersonal relationships cannot be built without communication and communication is a means of expressing feelings, needs or states. The exchange of information has an important role in both real and online spaces. Learners should be able to communicate in a relaxed, clear, unambiguous way, formulate statements and discuss not only in Slovak but also in English. Having communication skills means the learners are good listeners, can express themselves and they can eliminate differences between what they mean and what they say through communication. In this way, they learn to be responsible for the clarity of their utterance [4].

Presentation skills

These skills are similar to communication skills because communication is its foundation. However, when presenting in public, the learners are required to have their own and unique set of communication skills in order to make the speech clear, confident, logical and should impress the audience. In addition to verbal communication, non-verbal communication and the ability to incorporate digital skills when presenting audio-visual material is also important.

Empathy

The ability to empathise with other people's thoughts and feelings forms the basis of effective communication because about 90% of communication takes place without words [1]. Learners acquire a lot of information through gestures, mime and silence. These are expressions of emotion, which learners should learn to identify and take into account in communication. This means registering the wishes and needs of others, understanding and anticipating their reactions, and looking at something from the different point of view. We cannot assume that everyone feels the same way and that our point of view is the only correct one [4].

Social skills and conflict resolution

Social skills are important in building and maintaining relationships, resolving conflicts, helping the learner to become a member of a group and function successfully in a team. They can be seen as a kind of superstructure of empathy, i.e., perceiving emotional signals in people who are different from us, and adjusting one's actions accordingly [3]. They also include conflict management and resolution. Conflicts are a part of life and learners should learn to perceive them in the face of increasing differences in our society. Nowadays, knowing how to act calmly and listen to a point of view without an aggressive tone is very important.

Team skills

Teamwork is one of the best skills to develop because the school creates a natural "spring board" for their use. Many complex learning tasks are organised as group work. Such work requires learners to work together to achieve a goal, pursuing common interests as their own and subordinating themselves to them. Learners will become a team player if they are able to integrate into a team, perform assigned tasks and act beyond duties. By adopting this attitude, they will motivate others to perform better. Learners not only learn to accept the rules, the group hierarchy and their role but also develop other skills such as self-criticism, empathy, resolve conflicts, or engage creativity [2].

1.3 Intrapersonal skills

These skills are based on the personality of the learner and include emotional self-regulation, creativity and flexibility.

Emotional self-regulation

Feelings influence our behaviour and it is essential to work with them in ways that are beneficial. The learners should be aware of their feelings and know how to deal with them, as the lack of self-control can result in the burst of negative emotions. Emotional self-regulation allows us to manage feelings so that we behave appropriately to the circumstances. It is necessary for the learner to realise that positive feelings promote success and negative feelings hinder it. Those who can control themselves are better able to overcome failure, frustration, influence the quality of thinking and not give up. Inappropriate behaviour can also affect the teacher's work and the learner's assessment.

Creativity



Creative activities provide useful original ideas, thoughts or solutions. Being successful requires approaching tasks flexibly and creatively. Everybody can be creative because creativity is a natural aptitude at a different level at each age. School subjects can stimulate imagination, curiosity and encourage original results. ELT uses a wide range of open-ended tasks that allow solutions to be grasped in an unconventional way. Learners work voluntarily and the teacher should praise but not formally evaluate their efforts. The project method is the most striking example of encouraging the development of learners' creativity.

Flexibility

This skill is very necessary in today's changing environment. Our lives are accompanied by uncertainties - the most significant societal changes are the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Experts consider this skill to be one of the most important as the pace of changes accelerates [2]. Learners need to get used to change and not to take it as a danger but as a challenge. In today's world, it is necessary to learn new things, shift the traditional view and be able to adapt to the given situation. Flexibility is also important in teamwork, because nobody can be seen as an individual, but should be subordinate to the group.

Organisational skills

Self-management is another important skill that affects one's success in life. Good organization of the tasks to be performed by the learner saves not only time and effort, but also other resources, and thus makes the activity significantly more efficient. To accomplish all the duties, the learner needs stamina and motivation, which will prevent panic and stress. Organizational skills are the stepping stones to achieving goals and developing autonomy.

1.3.1 Methods of developing soft skills in the English language classroom

The following table lists some methods English teachers use in their lessons to develop the communicative competence while developing selected soft skills.

Table 1. Overview of methods and soft skills

methods/soft skills	intrapersonal	interpersonal
communicative methods dialogue, monologue, storytelling, direct method, communication games	self-esteem, self-awareness emotional self-regulation creativity, flexibility	communication skills presentation skills empathy, social skills conflict resolution
situational and problem-solving methods	self-control, creativity flexibility, organisational skills time management	communication skills, empathy team skills, critical thinking conflict resolution
discussion method discussion, debate	self-confidence, self-awareness emotional self-regulation creativity, flexibility	presentation skills communication skills, empathy critical thinking, social skills conflict resolution
project method	self-management creativity, flexibility organisational skills emotional self-regulation	presentation skills, team skills communication skills critical thinking, self- management
dramatic methods, role plays simulations	creativity, flexibility emotional self-regulation organisational skills	empathy, social skills communication skills presentation skills
didactic games cooperative/competitive/creative	self-regulation, creativity, flexibility, self-esteem	team skills, social skills empathy, conflict resolution

2 Research

The aim of our research is to identify which soft skills have been in the focus of teachers' interest as nature of online and in-class teaching and enabled their development. Our interest also lies in identifying those soft skills that have remained unchanged compared to in-class teaching and which could not be developed more intensively during online teaching.

2.1 Research method

As a research method, we chose a group interview focusing on the following areas:

- soft skills in in-class teaching and online teaching
- the absence of some skills among learners in online lessons
- effective methods of developing soft skills in ELT
- problems of developing some skills in in-class/online teaching



2.2 Research questions

We have stated following research questions:

- Do you consider the development of soft skills to be important during English lessons?
- Which skills does English language teaching allow you to develop naturally during in-class and online lessons?
- If you compare online and in-class teaching, is there any skill that was neglected during online or in-class teaching?
- Which skill did you find most lacking in your learners during online teaching and you had to focus on it more intensively?

2.3 Research sample

Seven qualified female teachers (aged 34-47) participated in interviews. All had experience of in-class and online teaching during the pandemic. At the same time, they had also integrated Ukrainian learners in their classrooms for several weeks. The interview took place in June 2022.

2.4 Discussion

All teachers understand their role not only in terms of developing communicative competence but also in terms of the global development of the learner's personality. They stressed that diverse topics focusing on everyday life and ordinary situations from learners' lives create natural starting points for incorporating soft skills. They mentioned topics of texts for developing receptive skills followed by discussions, games and the focus of learners' projects as suitable examples. They also stressed the importance of digital platforms and authentic materials that respond to current societal issues and can be at least marginally addressed in the classroom.

In the teachers' opinion, they consider project work to be the most appropriate method that naturally develops multiple skills such as teamwork, presentation skills, planning, self-management, decision-making, creativity in in-class teaching. Teachers also stressed the importance of self-assessment and critical thinking. Storytelling, role-plays and drama activities were also considered as appropriate methods. By applying the above methods in in-class lessons communication skills, self-confidence and creativity can be developed.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the online environment caused chaos and stress. Teachers had to deal with technical and organizational problems and the related absence of some skills in learners e.g. lack of self-confidence, emotional self-regulation and self-management. It was necessary to very slowly and patiently instruct learners on how to solve technical problems, helping them to build their self-confidence, support them, motivate them, while managing own stress. Thus, online teaching provided a natural environment to develop more intrapersonal skills.

In the first phase of online teaching, developing communication skill was in the background and one-way interaction prevailed. Slovak was often used in the lessons. Due to the initial unfamiliarity with communication platforms, teamwork, presentation skills and creativity were eliminated. Learners' self-assessment came to the fore due to web-based applications that provide immediate feedback from tests and games. The focus was on developing flexibility, the need to adapt to a completely new situation and function in it without emotional shifts. During online classes, teachers mostly lacked learners' self-management e.g. being connected on time, having everything ready, being attentive, etc. Some learners lacked empathy with classmates who had inferior devices and slower internet. Creative learners were not able to reach their full potential in the online space.

Conclusion

In general, we can state that foreign language teaching provides a very natural environment for the formation of the learner's personality and the development of soft skills. The objective, topic and type of lessons provide the basic platform for their development. Face to face teaching offers a more appropriate environment for the age group mainly because of the consolidation of social relationships and the use of elements of non-verbal communication. This environment allows for better development of interpersonal relationships. On the one hand, online teaching has encountered its limits especially in the area of social interaction and the possibilities of using certain types of activities. On the other hand, it was possible to develop intrapersonal skills. Despite this finding, the interviewees preferred in-class teaching supported by online learning.

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