

## INTEGRATION OF SOFT SKILLS AT THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES

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Over the last two decades the attention to the term «soft skills» has grown sharply. The employers nowadays expect the candidates to possess both “hard” and “soft skills”, as it is necessary for the employee to not only have the professional knowledge and skills, but also to be good at social competences.

The change in approach to work and the type of work itself led to the increasing demand for soft skills, such as teamwork, ability to communicate, problem-solving etc. Those have become crucial for employability; however, the researchers acknowledge the lack of soft skills among the young candidates, particularly university graduates [7, p.24]. One of the reasons for that is seen in the low level of connection and synchronization between higher education institutions and employers, theoretical rather than practical courses, which can result in difficulties to apply the knowledge to practice [6, p.25]. However, soft skills are needed not only at the workplace, they are also necessary for students to be able to learn new information autonomously, be able to communicate at educational institutions and socialize. Thus, it is important to implement soft skills development into education the earlier for the students the better and integrate teaching these skills into the curriculum. We will discuss how to do so particularly in foreign language (FL) classes.

First of all, we must define soft skills and identify what exactly is meant by this term. The term «soft skills» was coined in the end of 1960s in the USA Army, while looking for effective training and learning methods for the recruits [see: 1]. Further studies have offered different classifications of soft skills. One of the first researches was made by The World Health Organization which identified the following life skills: decision-making; problem-solving, creative thinking; critical thinking; communication skills; interpersonal skills; self-awareness; empathy; coping with emotions; coping with stress [5, p.3] In 2001 the Swiss Federal Statistical Office launched the program called De.Se.Co (Definition and Selection of Competences), where three categories of critical competencies were identified: 1)interacting in socially heterogeneous groups (which includes the ability to relate well to others, cooperate, and manage and resolve conflicts); 2) acting autonomously (which includes competencies that empower individuals to manage their lives in meaningful and responsible ways by exercising control over their living and working conditions, e.g., the ability to form and conduct life plans and personal projects, and to defend and assert rights, interests, limits and needs); 3) using tools interactively (which includes the ability to use language, symbols, text, knowledge, information and technology interactively) [3, p.26]. Although numerous classifications of soft skills nowadays focus on different perspectives, they mostly repeat the classification above one way or another. However mention should be made of World Economic Forum, where the top 10 skills needed in 2020 were defined as follows: Complex Problem Solving, Critical Thinking, Creativity, People Management, Cognitive Flexibility, Emotional Intelligence, Coordinating With Others, Judgment and Decision Making, Service Orientation, Negotiation. [1]

The next thing that should be discussed is soft skills in higher education. Despite acknowledging the importance of soft skills integration into the academic level, a great number of the subjects is still taught using lectures as the main source of information, and the curriculums, in most cases, do not offer a separate subject or course on any of the skills development [2, p. 965; 6, p. 24]. As practice is known as

one of the best ways to master skills and possess knowledge, it is more efficient to train soft skills while absorbing the hard ones, which means a learner-centered and problem-based approach that includes different educational activities aimed at developing different categories of soft skills mentioned above.

In foreign language classes it is possible to create a fruitful environment for soft skills development, as FL teaching involves development of many competencies and uses numerous activities, both oral and written. It is necessary to mention, that the teacher must be ready to take different roles in the classroom, as well as students, in order to organize the balanced and efficient work. Crucial skills for the teacher in this case are ability to moderate the classroom and to be the evaluator, control over teacher's and students' talking time, empathy and ability to create a safe atmosphere in the classroom. We also would like to mention that the methods described in this article may also be applied in teaching other subjects with necessary correction.

One of the widely used classroom activities is discussion, which requires from students expressing their opinion on some topic, usually quite controversial. Discussion teaches interaction with a group or a partner and develops critical thinking as well as negotiation. However in order to master the discussion students need to get the tools for it – language (e.g. phrases, commonly used to express the opinion, to contradict, to oppose) and idea generating. The teacher's role here is to provide the students with the necessary vocabulary and be ready to guide them gently to different perspectives of the question. The latter might be done through the vocabulary presentation.

For example, the discussion «What is the best place to live – city or the countryside» might be started with presentation of vocabulary, which characterizes both of the places given and should be followed with opinion phrases and the ways to present and opposing arguments.

The importance of role-play in the FL classroom cannot be overstated. It imitates the natural speaking, hence teaches participants to cooperate in a safe environment and react to the real-life situation under the tutor's supervision. Using

the role-play the students are getting prepared for different situations, dealing with emotions and interacting with different interlocutors. In addition, using different scenarios and roles students can develop emotional intelligence, as they have to try to use the perspective of the given role. Also this speaking activity helps students to master standing the ground in a conversation due to necessity to keep on playing the role till they reach the objective. In different scenarios it also improves problem solving skills. Obviously, role play must be also well-monitored and based on strong vocabulary and grammar knowledge.

One of the examples of role-play for reaching a compromise is dealing with hotel problems, where one of the participants is a hotel worker and the other one is a client, who experiences a problem in the room. Students must reach the solution and find the way to satisfy the needs of both participants. For more advanced speakers the conditions might change. E.g., a rude demanding guest and a tactful hotel worker.

Different types of group work are also beneficial for the students. They might be based on decision-making, creative tasks or finding a solution. All of them, provided that students are well-monitored, develop multiple soft skills, such as interaction with a group, relation to group mates, resolving conflicts, problem solution, critical thinking. For example, the students must find the viable way to reduce plastic use.

Lastly, projects and presentations have a great value for soft skills development. This activity, in contrast to the ones mentioned above, is aimed for improving the ability of students to act autonomously, look for information and ability to structure it as well as to speak publically. The preparation for this kind of task is usually quite long, it is reasonable to have it as a final learning stage activity to sum up all the knowledge and skills students gained over a module or a period of studies. A project can also increase student's motivation, as it can be based on extra-curricular topics and be part of creative thinking development. But no matter which topic it is, projects and presentations solve social tasks and make students more prepared for professional contexts. For instance, at a foreign language class student

can prepare a presentation on their hobbies in promotion or advertisement style, which will help students to interact and broaden their image of the other people and to defend and assert their interests.

In conclusion, soft skills are key competences for modern reality. It affects the success of students in studying and their chance to start a successful career. Therefore we must integrate these skills development into the curriculum, which demands changing the classroom roles and a whole teaching paradigm. For soft skills integration into FL classes various group and individual activities might be used.

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