

TO THE PROBLEM OF «SOFT SKILLS» DEVELOPMENT AS A PREREQUISITE FOR EMPLOYABILITY

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This article is centered on the problem of «soft skills» development in the university environment in general and outlines effective teaching methods and techniques applicable for a foreign language class in particular for attaining this goal. It contains a basic description of the aforementioned skills, the results of the survey conducted among the students of the Faculty of international relations, analysis and recommendations on organizing the educational process in a foreign language class in this connection. The article contains a conclusion on the advantage of heuristic methods and techniques and the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach.

Key words: competence-based learning; «soft skills»; «hard skills»; general competencies; instrumental competencies; interpersonal competencies; heuristic methods and techniques.

К ПРОБЛЕМЕ РАЗВИТИЯ «МЯГКИХ НАВЫКОВ» КАК ПРЕДПОСЫЛКИ К ТРУДОУСТРОЙСТВУ

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Данная статья посвящена проблеме развития «мягких навыков» в университетской среде в целом и описывает эффективные методы и приемы обучения, применяемые на занятиях по иностранному языку в частности для достижения этой цели. В статье присутствует базовое описание вышеперечисленных навыков и компетенций, результаты опроса, проведенного среди студентов факультета международных отношений, произведен анализ и представлены рекомендации по организации учебного процесса на занятиях по иностранному языку в этой связи. Сформулирован вывод о преимуществе эвристических методов и технологий и необходимости междисциплинарного подхода.

Ключевые слова: компетентностно-ориентированное обучение; «мягкие навыки»; «технические навыки»; общие компетенции; инструментальные компетенции; навыки межличностного общения; эвристические методы и приемы.

For the time being, employers increasingly stress the importance of developed core work skills with an emphasis on the so-called «soft skills», or the skills which are broadly centered on a person's ability of building up effective communication patterns in the workplace. They are considered as prerequisites for employability among university graduates [1]. Along with that, employers point out to the shortage of such skills on the global level as students are often focused on developing academic competencies in the first place [2]. However, almost every skilled job requires dealing with other people. And the higher you get on the career ladder, the more significant «soft skills» become to you.

The term «soft skills» is widely used in modern world. It is an integrated set of skills with a focus on interpersonal skills which are used to describe a person's approach to life, work and relationships with other people. They are not directly connected to a specific job, though, they may include some instrumental and general competencies as well, such ones as an ability to analyze and interpret information [3; 4, p. 35 — 39]. «Soft skills» are often contrasted with «hard skills» which are directly connected to the narrow area of professional expertise in a particular job.

Formerly, it was considered that «soft skills» could be learned best on the job. However, more and more employers nowadays stress the importance of training such skills at university or vocational college level. Moreover, they believe that such skills have a leading role, while training specific technical skills becomes a secondary task in view of the fact that technologies are changing at a very fast speed [1]. That is why quite a number of firms worldwide offer special soft skills training programmes for their employees as a part of their social package.

Which of the soft skills are particularly in demand? It should be said that their list is quite comprehensive as they represent a combination of interpersonal, general and also some instrumental skills like computer proficiency. We will briefly mention the most commonly referred to ones.

1) Verbal and non-verbal communication. It deals with abilities to convey information and communicate with other people clearly and effectively. This group includes an ability to persuade people, deliver presentations, an ability to «tell stories», use the body language effectively, etc.

2) Analytical skills. This group includes lateral thinking (thinking «outside the box»), creativity, an ability to conduct experiments, analyze and implement the results, etc. They are very important in the digital age.

3) EI or EQ — emotional intelligence. Such skills are believed to be the most important ones in this category. This group includes an ability to deal with stress, empathy and self-awareness.

4) Leadership skills. They can also be called managerial skills, but the meaning is much narrower. This group includes a problem solving capacity, coaching (an ability to teach and be understood), delegation of duties and supervising.

5) Teamwork. This category includes an ability to cooperate, coordinate each other's performance, an ability to mediate conflicts inside the team and effectively collaborate with other teams.

6) Time management. Time is the most valuable asset in our modern rapidly changing world. This category includes an ability to schedule tasks, track what is done and what remains untouched, and arrive on time.

7) Adaptability. This category includes adapting to the new people, new work responsibilities and new country or culture [1 — 4].

The aforementioned shortage of such skills presents a topical issue in view of the fact that young people are regarded to be a vulnerable group of employees: with more than 64 million unemployed or underemployed youth worldwide and 145 million young workers living in poverty, youth employment remains a global challenge and a top policy concern [5]. Meanwhile, decent work is one of the key points of the current sustainable development programme. The relevant Goal № 8 of the UNO Agenda calls to «promote a sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all» [6].

Within the framework of our research on the current level of the «soft skills» development among the students of the Faculty of international relations, we canvassed 100 respondents. We have arrived at the following results. On average, 73 % of the respondents think that they have good soft skills. 71% claimed an ability to communicate effectively, «tell stories» and demonstrate presentations. 84% of the respondents believe in their ability to think critically and analyze the situation. 75 % of the students assumed having a high emotional intelligence. 68 % claimed possessing leadership skills. 86% stated that they are good at teamwork. 50 % are confident they are skilled at time management. 77 % of the students believe that they have a great adaptability. However, the opinion of the employers at a global level differs from it: from their perspective, 30% of employees are lacking the required «soft skills» [2].

In what way can so-called «soft skills» be enhanced among the students? First of all, there should be a powerful internal motivation on the part of the learners themselves. For raising their awareness of the high demand placed on such skills, career guidance days with potential employers and former graduates sharing their experience seem to be quite an effective form of dialogue which already exists in the Faculty of international relations. It can only be recommended to involve more students from junior years who have not started working yet. The proper academic environment, application of heuristic techniques may be conducive to it as well.

We believe that a course in business or organizational communications should be made compulsory, especially for people whose future profession will be connected with management and important decision-making. Encouraging participation in relevant trainings, practically oriented conferences and competitions, like, for instance, «Mediation of the Future» in alternative dispute resolution will contribute to the growth of the social competence and increase the employability opportunities of the would-be specialists.

In a foreign language class more time should be dedicated to the productive kinds of speech activity. For instance, role-plays and simulations dealing with situations of future employment, preparing job interviews and analyzing them, assessing peer presentations in accordance with the criteria of content organization, manner of delivery, appropriate language use, visual aids, etc. may be very beneficial for the development of the speaking skills of the students. Due attention should be paid to the rules of correct criticism in this regard, and to the reasonable balance between the «teacher talking time» (TTT) and «student talking time» (STT).

In order to develop practical writing skills, students may be asked to draft their resumes in a foreign language for potential training programmes or summer schools which are offered by international companies like Ernst and Young (EY), for example. In fact, it is not an easy task to

write a powerful resume without relevant work experience. Involving authentic resources like BBC Learning English, organizing mock trials among legal students have proved to be effective forms of class organization as well. We believe that a synergy of effective methods and techniques of instruction practiced by the departments will contribute to the overall growth of the «soft skills» among the students and make them fit for the demands of the current labour market.

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