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## THE ROLE OF SOFT SKILLS IN FL LEARNING

The paper constitutes an attempt to define the role of soft skills in the process of FL learning. The data derive from the questionnaire distributed among the English philology students, and reveal the subjects' attitudes to the qualities under investigation, as well as their strengths and weaknesses within the competences given. Having identified the students' needs, the author of the project suggests ways of developing and promoting soft skills when shaping FL competence.

### **1. Introduction**

One of the individual factors determining mastery in a language is the level of social competence expressed in the understanding of the social context in which the language is used including the roles of the participants, the information they share and the function of their interaction (Brown 1987). The very components, underlying at the same time the qualities of strategic competence responsible for language manipulation and goal achievement, seem indispensable in our attempts to communicate with actions, attitudes and cooperation existing under the label of soft skills (Stewart 2010).

### **2. What are soft skills?**

According to Stewart (2010), soft skills are synonymous with appropriate contextual, interpersonal and behavioural competences. More specifically, as we read in Rao (2010), they are the skills and abilities that are essential to communicate with superiors, peers, subordinates, clients and vendors. These are the skills related to both verbal and non-verbal language for effective and efficient communication, and exist in two different forms, namely a personal and social one.

Personal skills are connected with an individual task executed by an employee. Their level influences a general quality of an executed task, its pace, adequacy, and reliability. They include:

- pursuing results,
- flexible thinking,
- readiness for learning,
- creativity,
- analytical thinking,
- organization of one's own work,
- openness to changes,
- decision taking,
- dealing with ambiguity,
- dealing with stress,
- problem solving,
- professional development,
- independence,
- conscientiousness,
- time management.

Social skills, on the other hand, are those skills that influence the quality of tasks executed with other people/co-workers. They impact on the efficiency of cooperation, communication or influence on others and comprise (Rao 2010):

- self-presentation,
- building relationships with others,
- sharing knowledge and experiences,
- identification with the company,
- written communication,
- being communicative,
- being well-bred,
- negotiation,
- customer service,
- intercultural experience,
- customer orientation,
- openness to others,
- the awareness of procedures and their usage,
- sales process,
- conducting presentations,
- relationships with customers,
- relationships with supervisors,
- team cooperation,
- cooperation inside a company,
- exerting influence.

Both personal and soft skills, as Acland (2000) has it, are perceived as the conditions of communication synergy tantamount to being empathetic and able to understand the emotions of others in simply looking for better solutions than compromise based on differences between people and mutual trust. These can be reached when performing particular group and individual roles, such as that of an active leader, a navigating leader, an emotional leader or a good student.

An active leader, according to Jedliński (2008), is responsible for (group) dynamics, assigning functions and tasks to do. Checking if a given task is performed well, and if the group or individuals head in the right direction is the role of a navigating leader. The emotional support, as the name suggests, comes from an emotional leader who names feelings verbally and/or non-verbally, and cares for emotional closeness as well as commitment. Finally, a good student is someone oriented on reading leader's intentions and adjusting to them, often asking others to do the same.

All in all, soft skills are attributes and traits related to personality, attitude and behaviour rather than knowledge or technical aptitude. They concentrate on how we say things (superstructure), that is the form of the message (e.g. *thanks for not smoking*) and constitute a polite and gentle representation of hard skill referred to as technical or administrative procedures related to an organization's core business. These, in contrast to soft competences, concentrate on what we say (infrastructure) or, in other words, the content of the message (e.g. *don't smoke*) and are executive in nature.

It is difficult to say which are more important than others, though, we have to remember that it is easy to teach someone how to use a machine, a computer or a language (hard skills) and much more difficult to teach him/her show up on time and be ready to work/learn. (soft skills).

### **3. Soft skills and emotional intelligence**

This "emotional" dimension of soft skills allows for placing them within Goleman's (1995) determinants of emotional and social intelligence. The former comprises emotional self-awareness, emotion control, a productive usage of emotions, empathy and relationships with others, which can be compared to a personal sphere of soft skills defined by openness, problem solving, dealing with stress to name a few. The latter, on the other hand, covers group organization, negotiation, entering into relationships with other people, and making social analyses, that is predicting motives and emotions of others (Goleman 1995: 191), which can be translated into e.g. team cooperation, relationships with customers, supervisors and inside a company belonging to social soft skills.

The two sides of the coin, that is a personal and social nature of soft competences, guarantee the adjustment to the feelings of people we work with, and elimination of misunderstandings before they evolve into conflicts. They also allow for treating leadership as non-dominance, but the art of persuasion, i.e.

convincing people to co-operate in order to reach joint strategy aims, and perceiving complaints as an expression of constructive feedback and building atmosphere (Goleman 1995).

#### **4. Soft skills and language learning**

In trying to place soft competences within linguistic and communicative competence, it is clearly visible that they seem to exhibit the features of both.

Linguistic or language competence is described as the knowledge of the language and ability to use that knowledge to interpret and produce meaningful texts appropriate to the situation in which they are used (Brown 1987). Language competence is best developed in the context of activities and tasks where the language is used for real purposes in practical applications.

Communicative competence, on the other hand, is defined as the ability to use the language correctly and appropriately to accomplish communication goals (Brown 1987). Being composed of four competence areas; linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic, it manifests in

- knowing how to use the grammar, syntax and vocabulary and asking what words to use and how to put them into sentences?
- knowing how to use and respond to language appropriately, given the setting, the topic, and the relationships among the people communicating, and asking which words and phrases fit this setting and topic, how to express a specific attitude (courtesy, authority, friendliness, respect).
- knowing how to interpret a larger context and how to construct longer stretches of language so that the parts make up a coherent whole.
- knowing how to recognize and repair communication breakdowns and asking how do I know if I've misunderstood or when someone has misunderstood me.

In terms of discourse, it is a sociolinguistic and strategic component that soft skills can be equaled with, that is the communicative capacity enabling context-embedded communication or, in other words, functioning in daily interpersonal exchanges.

As soft skills give us the very tools with which to take stock of our situation, take control of our development, take responsibility for our future, they seem to be highly important at the stage of university/college, and, thus, have become the main subject of the research.

#### **5. The research**

The inspiration for the research in question was an attempt to combine language and soft skills made at the College of Foreign Languages in Częstochowa. Being a novelty, the idea was received in different ways by students. Consequently, as

it was to be introduced into the classroom situation, I wanted to examine the students' opinions, preferences and experience in detail.

### **5.1. The research questions**

The question I investigated was two-fold, and formulated in the following way:

- Which of the soft skills would students consider as useful? and
- Which of the soft skills have the students already used when studying and/or working?

The first part of this issue concerned students' opinions on any would be situation(s) the very skills could be of great benefit to them while the second asked for students' experiences and occurrences of skill usefulness.

### **5.2. The subjects**

The sample was composed of 60 5<sup>th</sup> year English philology students, 29 representing teacher-oriented group and 31 representatives of a business-oriented one. The subject composition was intentional, and believed to be representative of the subjects studying and working at the same time, or, termed differently, assumed to be developing language and using soft skills on a regular basis.

### **5.3. The tool**

In order to investigate students' attitudes as well as experiences related to soft skills the questionnaire was designed. It consisted of a list of soft competences (15 personal and 20 social skills respectively) to be evaluated by the respondents from the point of view of usefulness. The subjects in question were asked to tick which competences they think might be useful for them, and which they find useful in their work on a daily basis, and justify their choice in 1 sentence.

## **6. The results**

### **6.1. Personal competences and teacher-oriented subjects**

The teacher-oriented group generated the results according to which personal soft skills are more important in theory than in practice (Table 1). It is reflected in almost each category of soft competences, and manifested by means of a 10% (and even) bigger difference in students' opinions and experiences, that is, greater usefulness of the skills in the former case than in the latter:

Table 1. The usefulness of personal soft skills (teacher-oriented group)

The usefulness of personal competences	Students' opinions (%)	The usefulness of personal competences	Students' experience (%)
1. dealing with stress	84	1. organization of one's own work	42
2. creativity	79	1. professional development	42
3. pursuing results	63	2. dealing with stress	37
4. organization of one's own work	58	2. problem solving	37
4. professional development	58	2. creativity	37
5. openness to changes	53	3. readiness for learning	31.5
5. problem solving	53	3. time management	31.5
6. time management	47	4. conscientiousness	27
6. decision taking	47	5. openness to changes	26
7. readiness for learning	42	5. pursuing results	26
7. independence	42	6. flexible thinking	21
8. conscientiousness	37	7. decision taking	16
9. flexible thinking	31.5	7. dealing with ambiguity	16
9. analytical thinking	31.5	8. analytical thinking	10.5
10. dealing with ambiguity	21	8. independence	10.5

The type and order of skills the teachers chose as particularly useful when presenting their opinions reflect the nature of the very profession and predispositions it expects from its practitioners (dealing with stress, creativity, pursuing results, organization of one's own work, professional development, openness to changes, or problem solving). Taking into account the subjects' comments ("It should bring about efficiency", "It's always time-saving", "It should bring about flexibility", "It usually motivates", "It usually guarantees better organization", "It's essential to be independent"), they seem to be determined by what the students believe is important, and what benefits a given skill brings them. Such an attitude of "a wishful thinking" derives from their comments, involving "should" and "usually".

When compared with students' experiences, the order changes and mirrors the so called "school life" and school expectations. The most useful are organization of one's own work and professional development ("I have to follow deadlines and cover the material", "The school requires it") followed by dealing with stress,

problem solving, creativity, time management and conscientiousness. Further in classification follow the skills teachers do not use, are not capable of or present a negative attitude to (openness to changes, flexibility, dealing with ambiguity, independence, analytical thinking). They justify such a state of affairs by writing that these are not popular and “safe” at school.

The difference between theory and practice amounts to a 10% discrepancy in favour of the former, which can be accounted for by the school reality and the way it changes perception.

## 6.2. Social competences and teacher-oriented subjects

Social skills have been given a similar order of importance in theory and practice (Table 2). In both cases the subjects under investigation emphasise knowledge (sharing knowledge and experiences), image (self-presentation), building relations and cooperation (building relationships with others, team cooperation) and communication (being communicative). The least useful are the qualities typical of business-related enterprises and behaviours in the form of written communication, identification with the company and customer-seller relations, the latter of which has been regarded totally useless according to students' experiences. An average difference in percentages between theoretical and practical dimensions is 10%, which again can be accounted for by the school situation and its restrictions.

Table 2. The usefulness of social soft skills (teacher-oriented group)

The usefulness of social competences	Students' opinions (%)	The usefulness of social competences	Students' experience (%)
1. self-presentation	58	1. sharing knowledge & experiences	47
1. sharing knowledge & experiences	58	2. self-presentation	42
1. team cooperation	58	2. building relationships with others	42
2. building relationships with others	53	3. being communicative	31.5
2. being communicative	53	3. being well-bred	31.5
3. negotiation	42	3. intercultural experience	31.5
3. openness to others	42	4. conducting presentations	26
4. intercultural experience	37	4. relationships with supervisors	26

The usefulness of social competences	Students' opinions (%)	The usefulness of social competences	Students' experience (%)
4. cooperation inside a company	37	5. openness to others	21
5. identification with the company	31.5	5. the awareness of procedures & their usage	21
6. being well-bred	26	5. team cooperation	21
6. the awareness of procedures & their usage	26	6. written communication	16
6. conducting presentations	26	7. cooperation inside a company	10.5
6. exerting influence	26	8. identification with the company	5
7. customer service	16	8. negotiation	5
7. sales process	16	8. customer orientation	5
7. relationships with customers	16	8. exerting influence	5
8. written communication	10.5	9. relationships with customers	0
9. customer orientation	5	9. customer service	0

### 6.3. Personal competences and business-oriented subjects

Opinions and experiences elicited from business groups turned out to be less diverse than the teacher-related ones (Table 3 and 4).

The first place (100%) has been given to the qualities the subjects consider useful in relation to the nature of the very profession, that is, readiness for learning, organization of one's own work, openness to changes and dealing with stress. The very order of importance in business environment is justified by the need to be active and efficient in general. Less, though still significant, attention has been paid to the skills associated with a particular position and predispositions it requires, namely pursuing the results, being flexible, analytical thinking, problem-solving, conscientiousness and professional development.

In practice, all skills are less important. The so called "professional" factor (organization of one's own work, openness to changes, dealing with stress) has been chosen by 75 % of those examined whereas the "personality" one (pursuing the results, flexibility, analytical thinking among others) by just half of the respondents under investigation, leaving the professional development aside (25%) because "the market does not demand it".



Table 3. The usefulness of personal soft skills (business-oriented group)

The usefulness of personal competences	Students' opinions (%)	The usefulness of social competences	Students' experience (%)
1. readiness for learning	100	1. organization of one's own work	75
1. organization of one's own work	100	1. openness to changes	75
1. openness to changes	100	1. dealing with stress	75
1. dealing with stress	100	1. independence	75
2. pursuing results	75	1. conscientiousness	75
2. flexible thinking	75	1. time management	75
2. analytical thinking	75	2. pursuing results	50
2. dealing with ambiguity	75	2. flexible thinking	50
2. problem solving	75	2. readiness for learning	50
2. professional development	75	2. creativity	50
2. conscientiousness	75	2. analytical thinking	50
2. time management	75	2. decision taking	50
3. creativity	50	2. dealing with ambiguity	50
3. decision taking	50	2. problem solving	50
3. independence	50	3. professional development	25

#### 6.4. Social competences and business-oriented subjects

When it comes to social skills, students concentrate on the image (self-presentations), relations (building relations with others) and knowledge (sharing knowledge and experiences) and perceive them as the most useful (75%). Less important, though chosen by 50% of the informants, appear to be the competences referring to a particular behaviour (negotiation and being communicative). Finally, the least useful are customer-oriented skills (customer service, sales process, relationships with customers) considered as such by less than 20% of the sample (Table 4).

Table 4. The usefulness of social soft skills (business-oriented group)

<b>The usefulness of social competences</b>	<b>Students' opinions (%)</b>	<b>The usefulness of social competences</b>	<b>Students' experience (%)</b>
1. self-presentation	75	1. customer service	100
1. building relationships with others	75	2. self-presentation	75
1. sharing knowledge & experiences	75	2. building relationships with others	75
1. identification with the company	75	2. identification with the company	75
1. written communication	75	2. written communication	75
1. being well-bred	75	2. being communicative	75
1. customer service	75	2. negotiation	75
1. intercultural experience	75	2. intercultural competence	75
1. openness to others	75	2. customer orientation	75
1. sales process	75	2. sales process	75
1. relationships with customers	75	2. relationships with customers	75
1. relationships with supervisors	75	2. team cooperation	75
1. team cooperation	75	2. cooperation inside a company	75
1. cooperation inside a company	75	3. sharing knowledge & experiences	50
2. being communicative	50	3. being well-bred	50
2. negotiation	50	3. openness to others	50
2. customer orientation	50	3. relationships with supervisors	50
2. the awareness of procedures & their usage	50	4. the awareness of procedures & their usage	25
3. conducting presentations	25	4. exerting influence	25
3. exerting influence	25	5. conducting presentations	0

When confronted with the reality, it is the other way round, namely dealing with the person of the customer becomes the most important skill (customer service selected by 100% of the subjects). Further in classification come the image-related competences (self-presentations) and relation-creating ones (building relationships with others) experienced by 75% of the questioned students. Knowledge, procedures and influence on others appear at the end of the list as they “have nothing to do with business”.

## 7. Implications for teachers

All in all, it is business groups which reveal their experience with the majority of social competences and not just “a wishful thinking” as it is in the case of teacher-oriented groups. Hence, the question is not whether to teach or not to teach social skills, but what to teach, why and how. Following Rao (2010), why do we not:

- Teach empathy

A good idea will be situations asking the students *what would you do if...*

- Dejargonize language

Prepare a series of activities requiring the students to use the exact language expressions in a conversation

- Use sense of humour

Use stories, ask students to finish, to begin or to create stories on their own.

Another suggestion could be that put forward by Jedliński (2008) who proposes a soft skill training consisting in role playing previously mentioned individual and/or group roles and norms. This could be best done by means of videotaping allowing the students to replay and recognize who’s who, change and strive for the desired behaviour. Apart from observations, it could also serve as a source of feedback teachers give to soften students’ reactions whenever necessary not only to increase their role, but also the role of soft skills in language learning.

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