Soft Skill Development in Moroccan EFL Higher Education

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Abstract

In nearly all institutions and educational systems across the globe, soft skills have become a top focus. Universities now try to accomplish the educational ideal of integrating and developing the soft skills of their students. There is a tacit understanding regarding the need of incorporating soft skills into education, and a great deal of literature has been produced on the subject, however, integrating and developing soft skills in language education is a less researched topic. While there are a variety of techniques of soft skill development, the primary objective of this article is to discuss soft skill development strategies in EFL higher education and soft skill integration models in higher education.

Key words: Soft skill; Development; Higher education; EFL classes

INTRODUCTION

As indications of success on the labour market and in life, there has been an increasing focus on competencies, skills, and values. These competencies have been referred to alternatively as critical competencies and soft skills.

Higher education in Morocco has issued amendments mandating the inclusion of soft skills in the curriculum. Since the development of the Strategic Vision Reform (2015-2030), interest in soft skills and employability skills has increased, although both the Bachelor System and the modified version of the LMD system have emphasised the inculcation of soft skills in the Moroccan Higher education as a whole. All of these initiatives attempt to educate students with the necessary soft skills for entering the workforce. However, teachers have not received any training or instructions pertaining to the instruction of soft skills. Still, certain ways of soft skills development were recommended. Consequently, it has become essential to provide favourable conditions for institutions to incorporate these soft talents.

This paper aims to provide an overview of the integration and development of soft skills in EFL programmes in particular and higher education in general. The following article is divided into four sections. The first section discusses the significance of soft skills. The second section addresses higher education changes and soft skills in Morocco. The third segment addresses the incorporation of soft skills into higher education. The final segment focuses on soft skill development initiatives.

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF SOFT SKILLS

The importance of soft skills in school, business, and professional settings is significantly more than was previously acknowledged. In order to be prepared for employment, university graduates must be equipped with the essential soft skills in addition to hard skills. However, higher education institutions lay a significant premium on hard skills while ignoring soft skills integration. According to Chamorro-Premuzic et al. (2010), it is crucial to apply "......a range of non-academic attributes, such as the capacity to cooperate, communicate, and solve problems, frequently referred to in higher education as

generic or soft skills." In addition, they argue that "unlike academic or disciplinary knowledge, which is subject-based, content-specific, and formally tested, soft skills consist of a variety of competences that are independent of formal curricula, albeit frequently developed by them, and rarely assessed directly" (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2010, p221). This quote clarifies the current state of higher education. Despite the fact that soft skills are seen as crucial for students to acquire, they are rarely taught and rarely assessed in higher education. Additionally, soft skills can be evaluated using subjective judgement rather than summative evaluation (Tevdovska, 2015).

Although soft skills are rarely included in higher education curricula, companies view them as crucial for employees of the future (Tevdovska, 2015). They believe that soft skills are equally as vital as hard abilities in the current employment environment. In his research, Robles (2012) identifies eleven soft skills that are viewed as significant and necessary in the workplace. The CEOs regarded communication, civility, adaptability, honesty, interpersonal skills, a positive attitude, professionalism, accountability, teamwork, and work ethics as essential soft skills. Therefore, incorporating and cultivating soft skills into the curriculum is of the utmost importance, since it boosts students' chances of gaining employment and pursuing successful careers in the future.

The current Moroccan higher education reform includes the incorporation of soft skills into the curriculum. To this end, this study will discuss reforms in Moroccan higher education and the different development strategies of soft skills in EFL Moroccan higher education and to explore the different teaching models of soft skills.

2. MOROCCAN HIGHER EDUCATION REFORMS AND SOFT SKILLS

Numerous reforms have been implemented within Moroccan higher education. In a 2018 speech, the King of Morocco emphasised the need of training students for the job market and keeping up with global changes. Since it is extremely impossible to predict the professions that will be required in the future, it is essential to cultivate pupils who are adaptable and capable of performing a variety of tasks competently. To attain this objective, the higher education system should undergo a major overhaul, namely the implementation of the Bachelor System (Ministère de l'éducation Nationale, de l'enseignement Supérieur de la Formation des Cadres et de la Recherche Scientifique, 2019).

However, the new Moroccan minister of Higher education Abdellatif Miraoui has postponed the implementation of the Bachelor system and reverted to the previous LMD (licence, Master, Doctorate) system with flagrant alterations (Miraoui, 2022). While Universities regularly offer educational information that is theoretical, the new LMD reform emphasises the importance of preparing students for the work market. Employers want students who are ready for employment, thus; applying academic knowledge immediately to the world of work. The new modified version of LMD comprises practicum, coaching, and service learning (Miraoui, 2022). A portion of the redesigned LMD consists of the soft skills that should be incorporated in higher education as indicated in the minister's presentation (Miraoui, 2022). As summarised in Figure 1.
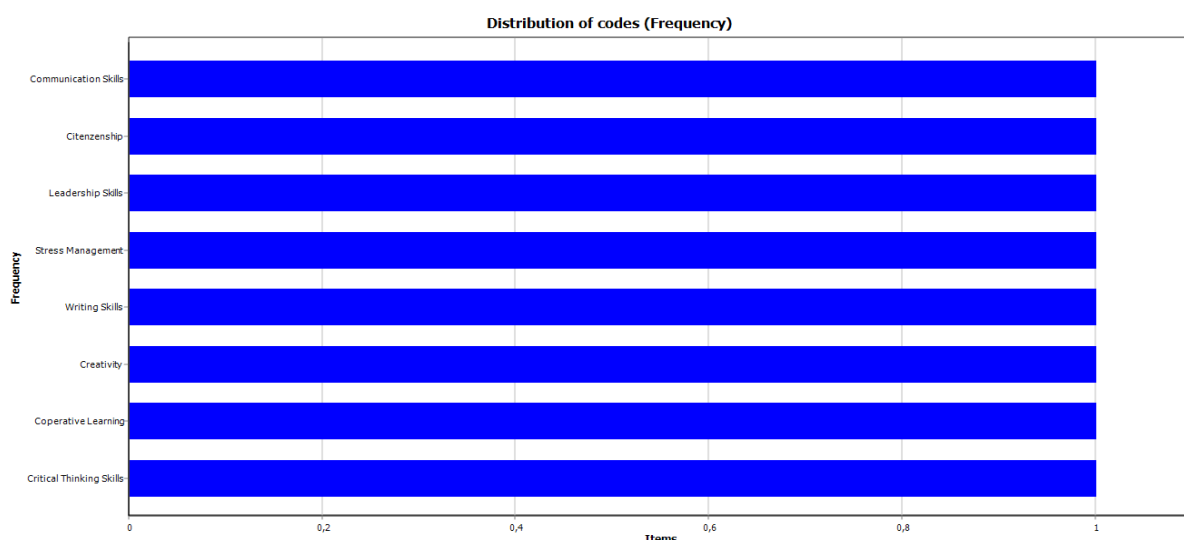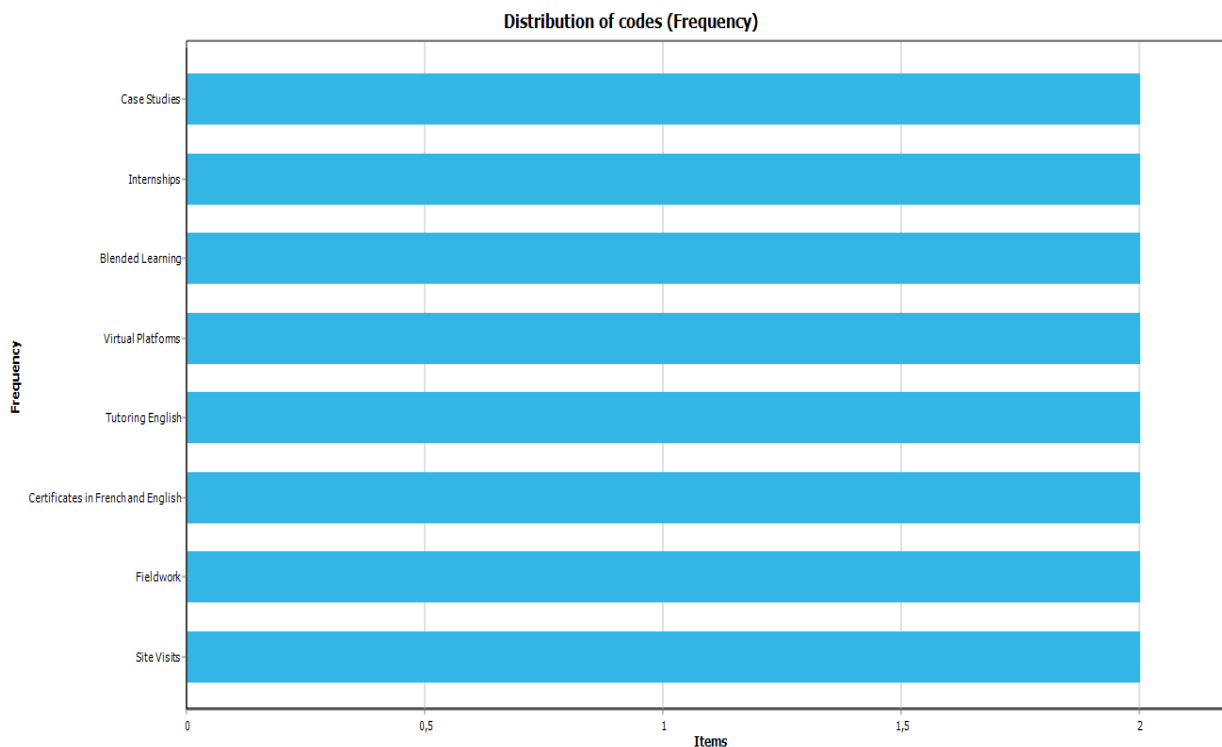

Figure 1
Important Soft Skills in Moroccan Higher Education

The most essential soft skills to include in B.A. and Master's degree programmes include communication, citizenship, leadership, stress management, writing, creativity, collaborative learning and critical thinking skills. These abilities are considered crucial for preparing students for the job market. Professors and educational institutions must implement these skills in the classroom through the use of specific strategies. To this end, the

modified version of LMD emphasizes the use of case studies, internships, blended learning, virtual platforms, English tutoring, certificates in English and French, fieldwork and site visits (Miraoui, 2022). As summarized in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Strategies for soft skill development

3. INTEGRATING SOFT SKILLS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

3.1 The Stand-alone Model

Moore (2004) identifies two schools of thought on the training and development of soft skills: the Generalists and the Specialists. The first generalists arrived in the 1970s and asserted that soft skills are actually generic and hence can be taught independently of content and applied to any subject. For example, the generalist method indicates that the soft skill of critical thinking is universal; therefore it can be taught independently and applied to any setting.

According to Chadha (2006), the Stand Alone or Bolting on approach refers to allowing students to acquire soft skills independently of the primary subject. This strategy gives opportunity for students to acquire soft skills through courses that have been carefully crafted for this aim. This technique can be executed in one of two ways: by including these unique disciplines within the existing structure of basic university courses (such as English language, entrepreneurship, and economics), or by offering electives such as public speaking, critical thinking, and history.

By offering Stand-alone subjects, faculties can provide students with the opportunity to acquire soft skills in a more formal and targeted manner (Shakir, 2009). In this category, courses are included as part of the program's overall requirements. The number of individual units and credits in this category is determined by the program's overall curriculum structure and requirements. These extra units can be accumulated and represent a minor topic area. A student enrolled in an engineering programme who is encouraged to take minor courses in management, public communication, or soft skills. In Belgium, the "Boost your Skills" initiative of the University to Enterprise and Society offers solo courses (a total of 14 credits) focusing on strengthening soft skills such as organisation, communication, and personal development to supplement the university curriculum (Cinque, 2016). However, such an approach typically necessitates an increase in the number of credits and duration of the programme. Therefore, according to Shakir (2009), if the topics are electives, students may decline to enrol for them if they have other mandatory priorities. In such instances, the job of lecturers is to encourage and advise students to enrol in such courses. Moreover, as these courses are considered to be electives, students tend to disregard their significance and concentrate primarily on the core subjects that are part of their course curriculum and on which they are evaluated.

Frequently, schools provide scaled-down versions consisting of once-a-week classes focusing on a limited number of skills. However, teachers are typically not prepared to teach such abilities, and thus tend to emphasise technical skills in their lessons, despite the fact that, according to numerous global studies, the majority of teachers recognise the significance of soft skills for students. The Stand-alone model is an effective approach for teaching soft skills; but, since there is no assessment and courses are often elective, students may not place a high priority on them and, in most situations, may disregard them. Therefore, stand-alone classes must be required and evaluated formally, just like any other school topic.

3.2 The Embedded Model

According to Adnan et al. (2012), in order to develop soft skills through formal teaching and learning, soft skills must be embedded in the curriculum of the general academic programme, where the objectives, learning outcomes, and teaching strategies associated with soft skill development are activated and embedded (Adnan et al., 2012). The "Embedded" style of teaching soft skills involves incorporating these talents into academic course material. Accordingly, Pritchard (2013) believes that direct integration of soft skills into a complete training programme, as opposed to assigning "stand-alone" courses, is the most successful method of teaching soft skills. As opposed to the "stand-alone" subject paradigm, integrating soft skills development into existing teaching and learning activities across the curriculum does not require students to take additional particular courses. Teachers instead create and implement formal teaching and learning activities in order to acquire soft skills using specialised tactics and methodologies. Thus, the intended learning objectives for these courses are accomplished and sustained. The incorporation of soft skills will emerge from the application of this approach and the modification of the course structure. As some or all skills are interwoven in the disciplines taught, students learn soft skills over the course of their whole programme (Shakir, 2009). The "soft skills integration strategy" offers a variety of subject contexts in which soft skills can be taught and assimilated. Students will have several possibilities to improve soft skills if institutions of higher education use integrated soft skill delivery systems within various course work programmes (Pachauri & Yadav, 2014).

Incorporating skills into the curriculum provides abundant opportunities for students to establish learning connections and develop a wide range of talents (Fieldhouse, 1998). Educators should be selective and innovative when building their teaching modules, since they play a crucial role in the implementation and evaluation aspects of this process.Given the adoption of the embedded model for the inculcation of soft skills, the curriculum in which it is embedded can be developed and evaluated based on a variety of outcomes, effective delivery mechanisms, and evaluation strategies. Each competency in soft skills can be described in terms of pertinent learning outcomes and then included into the semester's instructional plan. Therefore, lecturers should receive ongoing training in order to equip them with the required teaching tools for soft skills. In place of traditional teaching and learning methods, many teaching and learning activities such as questioning, class discussion, brainstorming, teamwork, presentation, role play, simulation, field work, and site visits are implemented (Truong, 2016). To solidify the learning and teaching of soft skills, however, it is crucial to incorporate soft skills into extracurricular activities so that students can learn more outside the classroom.

3.3 Integrating Soft Skill Through Extra-Curricular Activities

Soft skills can be implicitly fostered through support programmes such as extracurricular activities. This type of activities is non-academic in character, yet indirectly beneficial to the personality development of the kids. In contrast to formal education, which is typically confined by the school's physical bounds and a predetermined curriculum, out-of-school programmes can expose kids to a variety of settings and experiences. In addition to pursuing their interests, these programmes broaden the kids' personalities (Shakir, 2009). According to a survey conducted by World Challenge (2015)extracurricular activities aid students in broadening their worldviews and employment opportunities. In addition, these activities provide students with the chance to build self-discipline and self-motivation, so expanding the breadth of transferable abilities they can bring to the job. Thus, the likelihood of obtaining suitable employment is greatly enhanced. These activities and techniques aid in the development of soft skills and give practice opportunities.

4. SOFT SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN EFL CLASSES

Tevdovska (2015) examined methods for adding soft skills into foreign language learning and instruction as well as English language courses. Problem-solving and task-based exercises that present students with a problem or task that must be resolved. Moreover, they require students to use the target language. The purpose of group activities that incorporate discussions and debates is to instil communication and interpersonal skills. Students investigate ethical issues relevant to professional life, focusing on specific working situations that may emerge (for instance conflicts, pressure on one or more employees in the workplace, differences and similarities among the employees, accepting or rejecting authority). These activities consist of simulations of meetings, interviews,

and professional talks, as well as working environments featuring ethical obstacles and hurdles. Clearly, the aforementioned methods are not the only ones accessible for incorporating soft skills. However, they may be considered effective and engaging instructional methods. Therefore, they can serve as an appropriate introduction to instruction in soft skills for undergraduate students.

Using a descriptive method design, Andrievskikh & Lapina (2021) performed a study and gave recommendations for bringing the development of soft skills into university English Language classes. Participating in debates is one of the suggested ways to build soft skills. Students are able to practise communication, active listening, and presentations. In addition, arguments are utilized to improve teamwork and collaboration. Before and during debates, students naturally collaborate; they take turns speaking and elaborating on their arguments. To equip students with collaborative skills, they engage in early project work and receive considerable support, step-by-step directions, and helpful suggestions.

Caeiro-Rodriguez et al. (2021) evaluated the promotion and instruction of soft skills in the higher education institutions of five European countries. It provides an overview of best practices in different nations, with a focus on technological solutions that help the actual development of soft skills. The second component of the questionnaire focused on the perspectives of students regarding the instructional tactics used to teach soft skills. In engineering and economics, survey respondents chose problem-based learning as the most effective educational technique, followed by thinking-based learning, design thinking, and competency-based learning. Cooperative learning, gamification, and the flipped classroom were found to be the least successful instructional strategies.

Moustadraf (2021) explored how Moroccan students perceive the value of soft skills. To collect data, 255 undergraduate engineering students from four Moroccan universities responded to a questionnaire. Regarding the significance of teaching methods to the acquisition of soft skills, the study's findings indicate that graduates acquired more soft skills in active teaching models that deviated from the traditional academic model. Students ranked group work, internship, problem-solving approach, role-playing, case study, flipped classroom, lectures, and project-based learning as the most essential tactics for soft skills development when asked about the most effective pedagogical methods.

In a study, Azmi (2018) analysed the effect of an English language environment provided by ICT on intercultural exchanges and the growth of soft skills among Moroccan students. Students participated in focus group interviews to evaluate the impact of ICT-enhanced instructional materials and content on intercultural exchanges and personal growth. The majority of respondents concur that the usage of ICT allows students to discuss global issues on an interactive platform and promotes the dissemination and sharing of global values in the EFL classroom. In addition, students believe that the incorporation of online web content and applications, such as videos, podcasts, blogs, and images, increases the efficacy of class delivery.

5. CONCLUSION

The development of soft skills should become a priority for higher education institutions, as these are the employability abilities that many businesses seek today. These talents can be incorporated into educational curricula and cultivated in language classrooms. The article has demonstrated the significance of soft skills for employability and the changes of Moroccan higher education that incorporate soft skills to prepare students for the labour market. In order to put these skills into practice, the minister of Moroccan Higher Education proposed a number of strategies. Teachers of foreign languages should be encouraged to provide students with a clear explanation of how skills will be developed and tested during the course. To offer students with opportunities for active participation and to ensure the proper development of their skills, it is necessary to employ appropriate teaching strategies.

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