SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE PROBLEM

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Abstract. *The present-day globalised world is becoming more dynamic and soft skills become one of the main factors that enable people to participate actively in all aspects of life in it. Moreover, to succeed in personal and professional lives present-day students should be prepared to meet unpredicted challenges that are hard to imagine today. Taking into account the fact that the lists of soft skills are constantly changing and soft skills classifications provided by present-day researchers and practitioners vary greatly, the present research is aimed at finding out students' perspectives on the importance of soft skills identified by World Economic Forum 2023, on the one hand, and the role of English as a university discipline in soft skills development, on the other hand. To achieve the aim of the study, the researchers developed a questionnaire which included a combination of close-ended and open-ended questions and items on a 5-Likert scale (1 – very unimportant, 2 – unimportant, 3 – neutral, 4 – important, 5 – very important). Data collection lasted for four months and took place in September-December 2023 among students of Kyiv National University of Technologies and Design. To select the research sample, the researchers used a convenience sampling technique. The questionnaires were distributed by hand from researchers to first- and second-year students who studied English as a Second Language. The mixed design of research included qualitative and quantitative processing of the data obtained and the data analysis comprised manual calculations.*

Keywords*: English as a Second Language, English as a university discipline, English language classroom, higher education, soft skills, soft skills development, students, university, university discipline.*

Introduction

The present-day globalised world is becoming more dynamic and soft skills become one of the main factors that enable people to participate actively in all aspects of life in it. Moreover, the majority of present-day researchers believe that in today's workplace soft skills are of paramount importance and their importance is steadily increasing due to globalisation processes, ongoing advances in technology and changes on the labour market (Barakat & Shekh-Abed, 2023; Dall'Amico & Verona, 2015; Malykhin, Aristova, Kalinina & Opaliuk, 2021).

Education provided in different types of educational institutions and learning environments is regarded as "the great equalizer and the great enabler" (United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2018), as it enables students to gain knowledge and skills they need, to get better employment opportunities and to unleash their potential. The acquisition of various soft skills while studying at university gives young people the opportunity to be more resistant to social challenge, on the one hand, and more adaptive and more willing to embrace labour market challenge, on the other hand. Literature analysis clearly demonstrates that many universities all over the world are still more oriented towards shaping students' subject matter knowledge and skills. It means that although they recognise the importance of equipping students with industry-required soft skills, they do not regard this problem comprehensively and systematically.

In our research we fully agree with the ideas expressed in the document "Cross-Country Survey on Soft Skills Mostly Required by Companies to Medium/High Skilled Migrants: Methodological Approach for a Common Framework of Soft Skills at Work" (Dall'amico & Verona, 2015) which can be summarised in the following statements: soft skills represent the working style of any employed person; soft skills make any employed person unique; soft skills are strategic as they empower people to promote themselves in a proper way to find better jobs and make unique contributions to the development of any company.

Although the formation and further development of students' soft skills at higher education institutions may occur via workshops, seminars or other training sessions, the best results can be achieved by integrating required soft skills into the curriculum through incorporating specially designed activities and assignments (Barakat & Shekh-Abed, 2023; Malykhin, Aristova & Opaliuk, 2023a; Malykhin, Aristova & Opaliuk, 2023b; Rao, 2019). It should be mentioned, that many researchers believe that English as a university discipline contributes greatly in developing soft skills among students, since activities which are used in the English language classroom help students be active, interact with each other and learn by doing (Rao, 2019). Taking into account the fact that in many Ukrainian universities English is taught for four years (2 years –English as

a Second Language and 2 years – English for Specific Purposes), we may assume that the role of English as a university discipline in shaping and developing students' soft skills is significant as it has great didactic potential. But do students recognise the potential of English as an effective medium in developing their soft skills? And how do students perceive the importance of soft skills aimed at preparing them to meet unpredicted challenges in today's globalised world. These are the main questions which are of interest to our study.

Literature Review
Soft Skills

Literature analysis promotes diverse definitions of soft skills and approaches to categorise them. Moreover, in many documents soft skills are identified with transferable skills, 21st century skills or socio-emotional skills (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2019; USAID, 2018).

In the document "Global Framework on Transferable Skills" (UNICEF, 2019) soft skills are synonymous with transferable skills and are defined as skills that "allow young people to become agile, adaptive learners and citizens equipped to navigate personal, academic, social, and economic challenges (UNICEF, 2019). The list of soft skills which enable young people to succeed in the ever-changing world include "problem solving, negotiation, managing emotions, empathy, and communication and support crisis-affected young people to cope with trauma and build resilience in the face of adversity" (UNICEF, 2019).

According to USAID (2018), soft skills are regarded as "cognitive, social, and emotional skills, behaviors, and personal qualities that help people to navigate their environment, relate well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals". To help young people "become healthy, productive, included, and engaged individuals" (USAID, 2019), they have to be equipped with higher-order thinking skills (problem solving, critical thinking, decision-making), self-control skills (delay gratification, impulse control, directing and focusing attention, managing emotions, regulating behavior), social skills (respecting others, using context-appropriate behavior, resolving conflict), communication skills (oral, written, and non-verbal communication) and positive self-concept skills (self-confidence, self-efficacy, self-awareness and beliefs, self-esteem, well-being and pride).

Dall'Amico & Verona (2015) provide an extended definition of the concept of soft skills. According to researchers, soft skills are regarded as *"... a set of non-*technical skills and knowledge that underpin successful participation in work. They are non-job specific and closely connected with personal attributes and attitudes (confidence, discipline, self-management...), social (communication, team working, emotional intelligence…) and management abilities (time keeping, problem solving, critical thinking…). Due to a certain level of intangibility, some of them are rather difficult to be quantified and developed". Dall'Amico & Verona

(2015) group soft skills into three categories which contain some micro-skills, namely, navigating the world of work (identifying work goals, learning to learn, adaptability and flexibility, motivation, recognizing and applying work protocols and values, respecting hierarchical levels and rules, managing responsibilities, time management, managing the digital process), social skills (communication skills, managing the communication circle, stress management, team working, service skills, leadership, conflict management, cultural awareness) and achieving results (decision making, problem solving, creativity and innovation, critical and structures thinking).

In 2009 Wats & Wats conducted a study aimed at finding out the most important soft skills in students' views. The study enabled researchers to distinguish the following soft skills, namely, communication skills, problem solving skills, leadership skills, team work skills, IT skills and learning to learn skills.

Barakat & Shekh-Abed (2023) are convinced that people who have a fairly high level of soft skills, have more opportunities to achieve success in their personal and professional lives. Researchers explain that soft skills enable people to "…become more effective problem-solvers, decision-makers, and collaborators…". In their conclusions researchers state that such soft skills as active listening, empathy and collaboration have to be developed at universities as they enable future entrants into the labour market "to identify and address systemic problems and work towards sustainable solutions*" (*Barakat & Shekh-Abed, 2023).

Vandeweyer (2016) points to an interesting fact that employers and new entrants to the labour market often have a different perception of how well-developed young people's soft skills are and states that young people tend to overestimate their soft skills. As Vandeweyer (2016) mentions the purposeful formation of soft skills should start in childhood and combine efforts of parents and educational institutions. As for schoolchildren, Vandeweyer (2016) is convinced that soft skills development can be integrated across all school subjects.

In 2023 World Economic Forum (2023a; 2023b) proposed its classification of the most demanded skills on the global labour market in 2023. This classification consists of five skillsets each consisting of one or more subskills, namely, cognitive skills (analytical thinking and creative thinking), self-efficacy skills (resilience, flexibility and agility, motivation and self-awareness, curiosity and lifelong learning, dependability and attention to detail), management skills (quality control), technological skills (technological literacy) and working with others skills (empathy and active listening, leadership and social influence).

Taking into account that the lists of soft skills are constantly changing and soft skills classifications provided by present-day researchers and practitioners vary greatly, our questionnaire is based on the ten top soft skills identified by World Economic Forum (2023a; 2023b). Thus, the present research is aimed at

finding out students' perspectives on the importance of soft skills identified by World Economic Forum 2023 in their future work and the role of English as a university discipline in soft skills development.

Research Methodology
Research Tools

To achieve the aim of the study, the researchers developed a questionnaire which included a combination of close-ended and open-ended questions and items on a 5-Likert scale (1 – very unimportant, 2 – unimportant, 3 – neutral, 4 – important, 5 – very important). Such a combination of questions enabled researcher to get both quantitative data form respondents and more specific information on the problem discussed.

The questionnaire included the following questions:

Do you have any work experience?

Do you believe that university training and university curricular programmes should be aimed at developing both hard and soft skills among university students? Please, explain your response.

Do you agree that English as a discipline promotes the development of soft skills among university students? Please, explain your response.

What activities aimed at developing soft skills in the English language classroom, in your opinion, are effective?

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection lasted for four months and took place in September-December 2023 among first- and second-year students of Kyiv National University of Technologies and Design. To select the research sample, the researchers used a convenience sampling technique. The questionnaires were distributed by hand from researchers to first- and second-year students who studied English as a Second Language. In order to receive more truthful information, respondents were informed that their participation was voluntary and anonymous. Although 179 students agreed to participate in the survey, 13 questionnaires were rejected due to the fact that they were not completely filled.

Study Sample

The study sample consisted of 166 first- and second-year students who studied English as a Second Language at Kyiv National University of Technologies and Design. 104 respondents (62.70%) were male and 62 respondents (37.30%) were female.

Methods of Analysis

The mixed design of research included qualitative and quantitative processing of the data obtained and the data analysis comprised manual calculations. To describe the variables, the researchers used percentages (%), means ($\bar{x}$) and standard deviations (SD). Respondents' perspectives on the

importance of selected soft skills were measured from 'very unimportant' to 'very important' based on the 5-Likert scale intervals presented in Table 1.

Table 1 **Internal Level of 5-Likert Scale** *(made by authors)*

Mean Interval	Perspective
1.00–1.80	*Very unimportant*
1.81–2.60	*Unimportant*
2.61–3.40	*Neutral*
3.41–4.20	*Important*
4.21–5.00	*Very important*

The researchers made an equal contribution to the research and writing of the article (all authors of the article were involved in distributing the questionnaires among the students, processing data obtained, displaying the obtained data in the form of tables and figures and making general conclusions).

Results

The results regarding respondents' perspectives on the importance of soft skills identified by World Economic Forum (2023a; 2023b) are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 **Respondents' perspectives on the importance of soft skills for future work**
(made by authors)

Soft Skills	Variables					($\bar{x}$)	Overall ranking	Importance level	SD
	1 (N)	2 (N)	3 (N)	4 (N)	5 (N)				
Creative Thinking	0	0	9	74	83	4.45	4	Very important	0.49
Analytical Thinking	0	4	20	66	76	4.29	6	Very important	0.33
Resilience, Flexibility and Agility	0	0	26	69	71	4.27	7	Very important	0.32
Motivation and Self-Awareness	0	0	33	64	69	4.22	8	Very important	0.32
Curiousity and Lifelong Learning	0	0	15	54	97	4.49	3	Very important	0.36
Dependability and Attention to Detail	2	14	30	55	65	4.01	10	Important	0.30
Quality Control	0	7	37	58	64	4.08	9	Important	0.37
Technological Literacy	0	0	5	51	110	4.63	1	Very important	0.38
Empathy and Active Listening	0	3	23	62	78	4.30	5	Very important	0.33
Leadership and Social Influence	0	0	6	50	110	4.62	2	Very important	0.38

n=166

Thus, the obtained results show that the list of soft skills which are ranked by respondents as very important include 'technology literacy' ($\overline{x}$=4,63, SD=0.38), 'leadership and social influence' ($\overline{x}$=4,62, SD=0.38), 'curiosity and lifelong learning' ($\overline{x}$=4,49, SD=0.36), 'creative thinking' ($\overline{x}$=4,45, SD=0.49), 'empathy and active listening' ($\overline{x}$=4,30, SD=0.33), 'analytical thinking' ($\overline{x}$=4,29, SD=0.33), 'resilience, flexibility and agility' ($\overline{x}$=4,27, SD=0.32), 'motivation and self-awareness' ($\overline{x}$=4,22, SD=0.32). The respondents rank the following soft skills as important, namely, 'quality control' ($\overline{x}$=4,08, SD=0.37) and 'dependability and attention to detail' ($\overline{x}$=4,01, SD=0.30). The average of selected soft skills is 4.34 ($\overline{x}$), it means that respondents regard them as very important for their future work.

Figure 1 visualises the results concerning students' perspectives on the importance of soft skills identified by World Economic Forum (2023a; 2023b) for their future work.
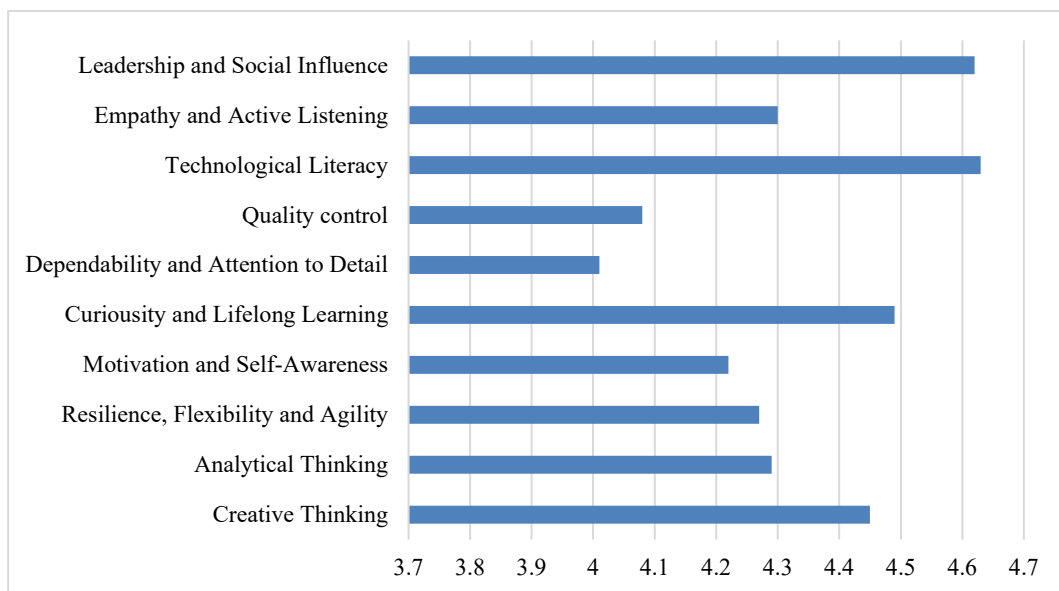

*Figure 1 **Ranking of Soft Skills by Respondents** (made by authors)*

Figure 2 presents the results concerning the first question "*Do you have any work experience?*". 53 respondents (31.93%) indicated that they had some work experience and 113 respondents (68.07%) replied negatively. Students who have some work experience understand the importance of soft skills and realise what soft skills are required on the labour market. Despite the fact that the majority of respondents do not have any work experience, we can suggest that present-day first- and second-year students are aware of requirements expected by employees and personal and professional qualities they have to possess in order to be competitive on the labour market.
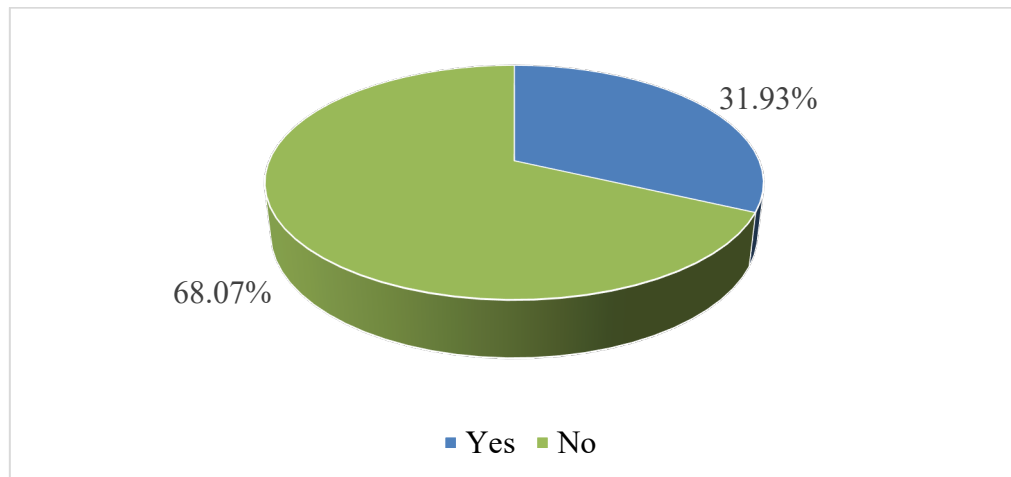
Figure 2 **Respondents' responses to the question about their work experience**
(made by authors)

Figure 3 displays the respondents' responses to the question "*Do you believe that university curricular programmes should be aimed at developing both hard and soft skills among university students*?"
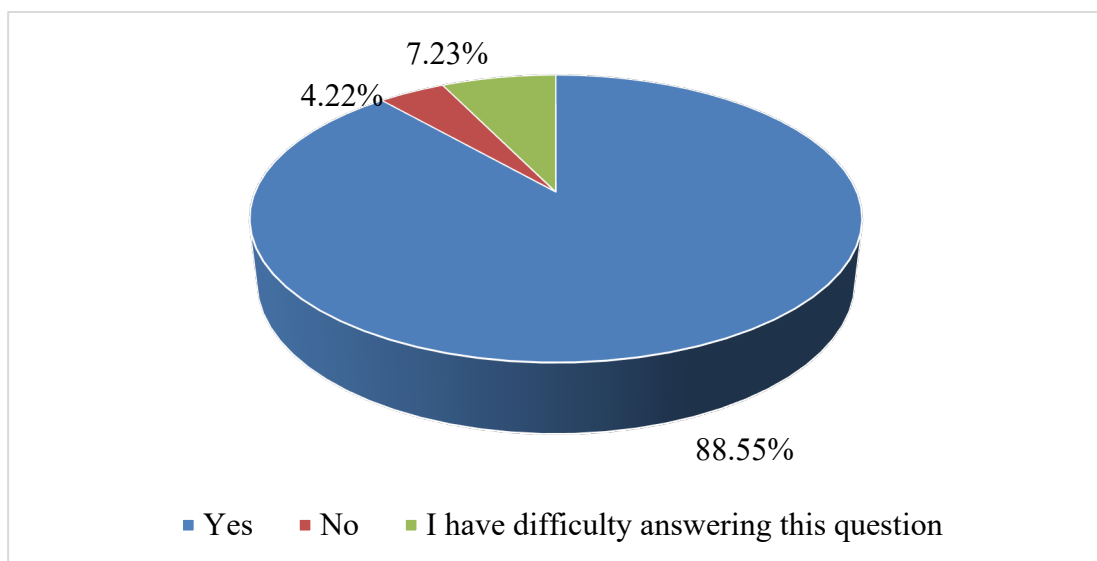
Figure 3 **Respondents' responses to the question about university curricular programmes and their orientation towards the development of both hard and soft skills among university students** *(made by authors)*

The results obtained enable us to claim that the majority of respondents (88.55%) strongly believe that university training as a whole and university curricular programmes should prepare students to show appropriate knowledge and expertise in the area of their specialisation and to be adaptive in different challenging situations. Responding to this question they explained that the acquisition of required soft skills in the workplace would take some time and this

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might adversely affect the performance of work and their treatment as professionals. The following excerpts from respondents' replies demonstrate their opinions on the question:

S17: … *After training at university, I am going to start working and will definitely need both hard and soft skills to succeed in the workplace. I do believe that soft skills have to be shaped and developed at school and university and they will be improved at work.*

S97: *Of course, the development of soft skills should be obligatory in the educational process. These skills are incredibly useful in our future profession, whatever it may be. Soft skills are also useful in the learning process, as they enable us to learn the educational material better and increase the likelihood of using it in the future.*

S101: *University education should promote the development of soft skills among students. Soft skills, such as analytical and creative thinking, technological literacy, empathy and active listening help students to solve problems, set goals and adapt to changes in today's world. They both contribute to our personal development and prepare us to meet challenges in various areas of life and career.*

The results concerning the respondents' perspectives on the importance of English as a university discipline in developing soft skills among university students are given in Figure 4.
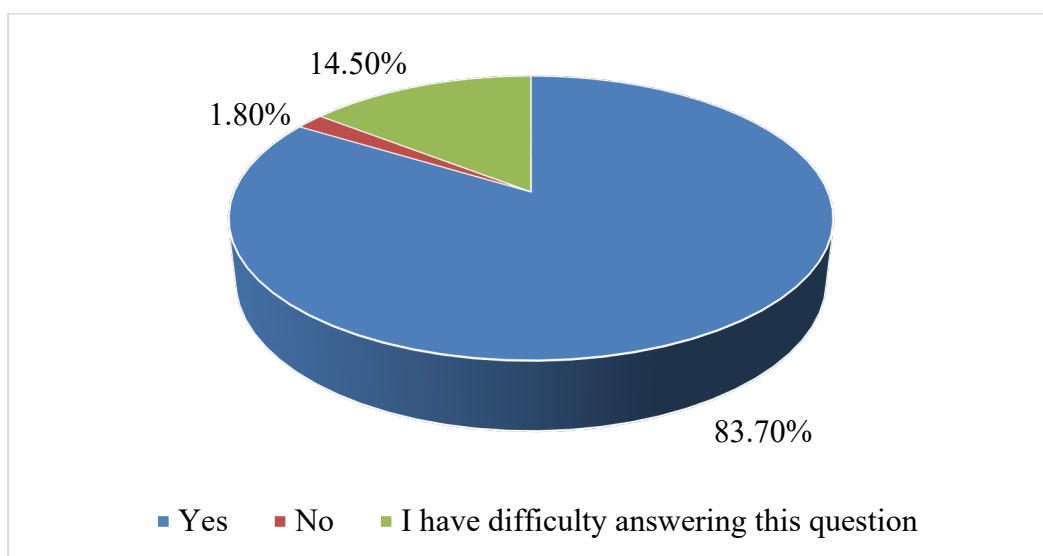
Figure 4 **Respondents' perspectives on the importance of English as a discipline in developing soft skills among university students** *(made by authors)*

As the Figure 3 shows the majority of respondents (83.70%) are aware of the importance of English as a discipline in developing soft skills. The respondents explain that they do believe that a wide range of activities which English language

teachers usually use in their classrooms are aimed at developing both English language skills (oral and written communication skills) and soft skills.

The results regarding the respondents' perspectives on effectiveness of activities aimed at developing soft skills in the English language classroom are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 **Respondents' perspectives on effectiveness of activities aimed at developing soft skills in the English language classroom** *(made by authors)*

Types of activities	Responses	
	Number	Percent
Writing written works (short stories, compositions, essays, creative writing, etc.)	122	73.49
Writing self-analysis essays	97	58.43
Writing reflexive essays	102	61.45
Role plays	126	75.90
Games	141	84.94
Discussions and debates on various topics	117	70.48
Individual projects on various topics	77	46.39
Group projects on various topics	129	77.72
Self-doings activities on various topics	137	82.53
Critical analysis of texts on various topics	93	56.02
Critical analysis of video materials on various topics	106	63.86
Research activities (participation in conferences, writing abstracts, etc.)	75	45.18

n=166

As is evident from the results obtained, English as a university discipline has huge potential in developing soft skills among university students. Here is one of the excerpts from respondents' replies on effectiveness of activities aimed at developing soft skills in the English language classroom:

S34: … *Such activities which include critical analysis of texts and video materials, discussions and debates, writing self-analysis and reflexive essays, research activities are an important element of the educational process and can be used in various disciplines. But, in most cases, all of them are used in the English language classroom. The use of these activities contributes to the development of analytical and creative thinking, communication skills, and, what is most important, motivates us to participate in the learning process more actively. During our English language classes, we learn to analyse various information, think independently and not to be afraid of challenges. In my opinion, role plays are amazing. They help us to see ourselves with new eyes…*

Thus, the usage of a wide range of activities enables English teachers to turn their students into curious, highly motivated and reasonable professionals who want to live effectively and benefit companies they work for. English, in this case,

becomes an effective medium for improving students' English language proficiency and developing their soft skills.

Conclusions

The present research is aimed at finding out students' perspectives on the importance of soft skills for success in their future work and the role of English as a university discipline in soft skills development. The findings suggest that although the majority of respondents do not have any work experience, they are aware of requirements expected by employees and personal and professional qualities they have to possess in order to be competitive on the labour market. Based on the research results we can conclude that the respondents rank technology literacy, leadership and social influence, curiosity and lifelong learning, creative thinking, empathy and active listening, analytical thinking, resilience, flexibility and agility, motivation and self-awareness as very important and quality control, dependability and attention to detail as important. Explaining that the lack of soft skills may adversely affect the performance of work, the majority of respondents are convinced that university training therefore should be aimed at both preparing students to show appropriate knowledge and expertise in the area of their specialisation and to be adaptive in different challenging situations at the workplace.

Moreover, the obtained results clearly demonstrate that all the respondents believe that to develop soft skills in the English language classroom, English language teachers should use various activities. Among the most effective activities aimed at developing soft skills the respondents point out the use of discussions and debates, games, role plays, individual and group projects, different types of essays, research activities etc. It enables us to claim that the purposeful use of the entire spectrum of identified activities offers great opportunities for implementing various interactive methods and techniques of teaching and learning in the English language classroom aimed at improving students' English language proficiency, on the one hand, and developing their soft skills, on the other hand. Thus, taking into account the results obtained we can affirm that English as a university discipline has great didactic potential in shaping and developing students' soft skills.

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