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**Olga Lazareva,****Olena Kovtun**

National Technical University «Kharkiv Polytechnic Institute»

## **DEVELOPING SOFT SKILLS AT ESP CLASSES IN TECHNICAL HEIS**

*The growing role of social competencies, also referred to as soft skills, for a future working career is discussed, given a significant altering of the concepts of job families and functions, profession, workplace, working hours in the changing economy. The major attention is paid to such soft skills as collaboration, communication, critical thinking and problem-solving and the ways they can be developed at ESP classes in technical HEIs. Some exercises based on student-centred approach aimed to form these important skills are mentioned. To assess the effectiveness of the teaching methods applied through the module devoted to communication in academic and professional environments, a survey was undertaken among students of the first year. Its results show that innovative methods including role plays, team work and brain-storming are generally perceived by students as less appealing and efficient than more traditional ones such as reading or translation. It is concluded that more efforts are needed to introduce student-centred practices for developing soft skills.*

**Keywords:** *soft skills, social competencies, ESP, innovative teaching methods, student-centred learning.*

### **Introduction**

In the coming years the global workforce is expected to experience significant altering of job families and functions. The World Economic Forum recently stated that «65% of children entering primary school today will ultimately end up working in completely new job types that do not yet exist» [1]. Even today we can see that the concept of «profession» itself has blurred, with an employee having to master still new skills and sometimes becoming literally jack-of-all-trades. For instance, emerging small-scale start-uppers usually simultaneously become experts in accountancy, logistics, management etc. apart from their major occupation.

Moreover, the workplace is no more as it used to be. The introduction of advanced information technologies, creation of intercontinental companies, rearrangement of traditional economies have

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made and will continue making work and workers more flexible, adjustable to new conditions and challenges. This means that employees are no more strictly tied to a definite workplace and working hours; members of teams may be located in different cities, countries and even continents. And the work itself is less routine requiring skills and knowledge of many adjacent fields. For example, being at least basically computer literate is now a must in almost all areas, while 30 years ago access to computers was a privilege of the few. Project work, one example of non-routine activity, has increased 40-fold over the past 20 years, making collaboration and teamwork more important than ever [2].

This is especially apparent in middle-class jobs that will increasingly depend on a worker's ability to process and convey information [3]. To succeed at work, people must be able not only to analyse problems without the benefit of instructions but also to communicate their findings to others, across borders and time zones.

Another reason to rethink the approach to preparing for future jobs is the huge rise of AI technologies and robotics, which have penetrated into all spheres of our life. While robots have been historically confined to performing manufacturing tasks explicitly preset by designers, now advanced robotic systems have been successfully implemented carrying out a wide range of once only human cognitive tasks. And this tendency is going to ever grow in future. The estimates [4] show that «about 47 percent of total US employment is in the high risk of being automated relatively soon, perhaps over the next decade or two».

The U.S. Department of Education emphasises [5] that 60 percent of all new jobs in the early 21st century will require skills that only 20 percent of the current workforce possesses, which means urgent necessity in reshaping the whole process of preparation for a future working career, especially in higher education.

An individual starts to make choices in education that will affect the skills needed in their career at least a decade before they enter the workplace – by which time technology and consumer preferences will have changed significantly.

In 2015, the World Economic Forum published a report [6] that focused on the pressing issue of the 21st-century skills gap. In that report, they defined a set of 16 crucial proficiencies for education in the 21st century. Those skills include six «foundational literacies», such as literacy, numeracy and scientific literacy, and 10 skills that are labelled «competencies» and «character qualities». Competencies, which are also referred to as *soft skills* [7], are the means by which students approach complex challenges; they include collaboration, communication, critical thinking and problem-solving. Character qualities are the ways in which students adjust to changing environment; they include curiosity, adaptability

and social and cultural awareness. Overall, they argue that social skills – such as persuasion, emotional intelligence and teaching others – will be in higher demand across industries than narrow technical skills (or *hard skills*), such as programming or equipment operation and control. In essence, technical skills will need to be supplemented with strong social and collaboration skills.

That is why it is clear that our education system needs to adapt by providing training that places more emphasis on developing these abilities in students, moving beyond the current learning-for-exam focus to more group-based projects, in-class presentations, and team-working exercises.

### **Materials and methods**

In this article we will focus on soft skills and the ways they can be developed at English classes. We assume that active methods of teaching based on student-centred approach are more efficient in fostering social skills than traditional ones. Our discussion will be based upon the analysis of the survey made in National Technical University «Kharkiv Polytechnic Institute» (NTU «KhPI») aimed at learning how students perceive innovative teaching approaches compared to traditional ones.

Recently, the department of foreign languages has designed and implemented a competence-based syllabus for the students of technological departments who study ESP during their first and second years. The first module, 64 hours long, is devoted to socialising in professional and academic environments. And it is during this time when communication and collaboration skills are mostly developed. The activities fostering these abilities in students are embedded into the syllabus through various tasks including time-proven classical ones such as reading or vocabulary exercises as well as more active pursuits, i.e. role-plays, surveys, interviews, research work etc. The latter are sometimes called innovative methods of teaching despite the fact that they are known and have been used for decades. Nevertheless, it should be admitted that most students have no or little experience in applying them. That is why the word innovative is quite appropriate in this context.

Advocates of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills favour student-centred methods – e.g. problem-based learning and project-based learning – that allow students to collaborate, work on authentic problems, and engage with the community [8]. And, yet, Ukrainian teachers still rarely use them. But most teachers of our department after duly organized ESP teacher development seminars given by the trainers of the British Council (Ukraine) have started effectively using their teaching strategies based on student-centred approach.

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Following are the ways we applied during the English classes for non-native speakers to maintain some of the basic soft skills in the framework of this approach.

- Communication. As a soft skill, communication is not about being just loquacious. Able communicators can adjust their speaking style in agreement with their audience, and explain complex issues to their colleagues and collaborators. Communication is also an important aspect of leadership, with the University being the place to raise future leaders in scientific and technological spheres.

To develop this skill in ESP class it is necessary to create a language-rich environment. We can achieve this e.g. using audio- and videofiles of different situations from everyday life and proposing students to role-play them after listening or watching (buying tickets at the booking-office, leaving a message on the phone, booking a hotel room, etc.).

One way of promoting communication is arranging discussion in pairs or groups. The ability to communicate ideas and to be an active listener has been the less developed skill both in Ukrainian secondary school and at the university. Besides, most students with poor English are shy enough to demonstrate their English to the teacher and the whole class, they are afraid of making mistakes preferring to be silent rather than stumbling every other moment. Moreover, the usual practice of the teacher asking the students one after another steals time and demotivates those not engaged in interaction. That is why pair and small-group work, that provides full-scale involvement in the activity, may serve as a technique which can repair communication training gap.

- Collaboration (or Teamwork). Good teamwork involves a combination of other soft skills. Working in a team towards a common goal requires the intuition and interpersonal acumen to know when to be a leader, and when to be a listener. Good team players are perceptive, as well as receptive to the needs and responsibilities of others.

To train this skill, it is important to foster greater respect and tolerance for others and provide opportunity for group work. Only working on a definite task of the project students can have a practical experience of teamwork and learn how to distribute or assign roles in the team and achieve the required goals.

As an example we can discuss preparing a presentation by a small team (3-4 students). They select the topic in the area in question, choose the head of the group who set the tasks. After the presentation is delivered, their work is assessed collectively.

- Problem solving (Critical thinking) does not just require analytical, creative and critical skills, but a particular mindset: the efficiency of the problem solution should also depend on measured judgment and rely on

strong teamwork. Individuals who solve problems with the aid of the team have a great advantage over those who toil alone.

Creative problem solving requires corresponding creative activities. So our teachers use exercises and techniques to help students define the problem, brainstorm ideas, decide on a solution and even implement the solution and review the results. The purpose of these activities is to get students to think about the problem in different ways and have some fun while solving it. The activities can be performed individually (for example, make a rule out of examples) or as a group work when a team of members analyze information, negotiate and cooperate with one another. It also encourages them to listen to each other and to think about the way they make decisions. One example may be suggesting that after reading a professional text the students should discuss and propose another way of solving the same problem.

### **Results**

To assess the effectiveness of the teaching methods applied through the first module, a survey was undertaken among students of the first year. There were 41 respondents from different student groups who evaluated their attitude to the methods and activities. The questionnaire included a randomly arranged list of activities and an evaluation grid. For each activity, students were asked to score from 0 to 5 (1) the frequency of its use; (2) how they like it and (3) its efficiency for them personally. The activities included both traditional ways of teaching, e.g. oral and written translation, learning texts and dialogues by heart, vocabulary exercises, tests etc., and active ones such as pair work, role-plays, presentations, brainstorming, totalling 26 items. This does not mean that all these activities and techniques were used equally by all teachers. The main idea was to receive students' feedback mainly on the perception of active methods compared to traditional ones.

After collecting data from the respondents, we averaged the scores (1), (2) and (3) across each method/activity and then aggregated them into two groups corresponding to the abovementioned traditional and innovative approaches. The obtained data are presented in the following chart (Figure 1).

From the chart it is evident that traditional methods are evaluated higher than innovative ones on each of the three aspects, while the respondents express almost the same positive attitude to both. These results have absolutely proved our assumption on students' little experience in use of the innovative methods. It really took time and effort to make the learners accustomed e.g. to pair work or brainstorming activities. This is one of the reasons, in our opinion, why the scores for innovative methods are a little lower.

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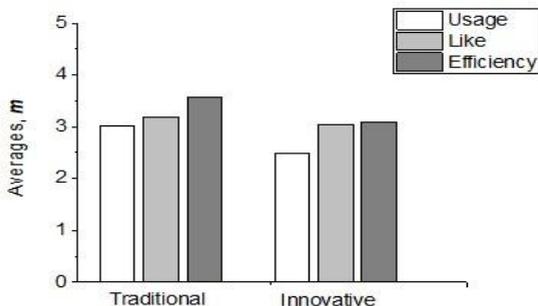


Figure 1. Students' average scores of frequency, likes/dislikes and efficiency of traditional and innovative teaching methods and activities

It is worth, though, mentioning that one of the active practices received the highest possible scores far outranking all others. This is role-plays, their likes averaging 3,87 points and effectiveness – 3,90 points, exceeded only by the traditional way of teaching when students work under the guidance of the teacher with 3,96 and 3,97 respectively. It was evident both in class, when students eagerly participated in such activities, and by the results of the questioning.

The lowest grades out of the innovative methods were given to preparing a presentation: likes – 1,95 and effectiveness – 2,23 points. The reason for students' underestimation of this activity and innovative methods in general may be overwhelming tradition of teacher-centred classes where students rely in obtaining knowledge and skills mostly on the teacher but not themselves or their peers. So changing students' attitude towards active learning methods is really vital.

### Discussion and conclusions

Soft skills are an integral part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills required by ever evolving economy. Soft skills give the opportunity to be successful beyond the field of activity and the way of work. They are significant both in work and in life. The higher you climb your career ladder the greater role social skills play in your life. Creation of soft skills is obviously built on the basis of training logical skills with the help of exercises and practical simulations making students to solve problems by themselves. It is hard to check the degree of mastering these skills that is why the development of proper exercises is so important.

More efforts are needed on the part of students and teachers as well as educational policymakers to shift the emphasis from passive receiving knowledge to active knowledge-mining not least via communication and collaboration.

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**Ольга Лазарева, Олена Ковтун. Розвиток соціальних компетенцій (soft skills) на заняттях з англійської мови за професійним спрямуванням (ESP) в технічних ВНЗ.**

Обговорюється зростаюча роль соціальних компетенцій, які також називаються «гнучкими навичками» (soft skills), для майбутньої професійної кар'єри, з огляду на значні зміни у сутності роботи та робочих функцій, професії, робочого місця, робочого часу в умовах мінливої економіки. Основна увага приділяється таким соціальним компетенціям як співпраця, комунікація, критичне мислення та вирішення проблем, а також способам їхнього розвитку на заняттях з англійської мови за професійним спрямуванням (ESP) у технічних ВНЗ. Розглядаються деякі вправи, основані на студентоцентрованому підході, які спрямовані на формування цих важливих навичок. Для оцінки ефективності методів викладання, що застосовуються у навчальному модулі, присвяченому спілкуванню в академічному та професійному середовищі, було проведено опитування серед студентів першого курсу. Його результати показують, що інноваційні методи,

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*такі як рольові ігри, командна робота та мозковий штурм, як правило, сприймаються студентами як мени привабливі та ефективні, ніж традиційні, наприклад, читання чи переклад. Зроблено висновок, що необхідні додаткові зусилля з впровадження студентоцентрованих вправ та завдань для розвитку гнучких навичок.*

**Ключові слова:** *гнучкі навички, соціальні компетенції, англійська мова за професійним спрямуванням, інноваційні методи навчання, студентоцентрований підхід.*

### **Olga Lazarjewa, Olena Kowtun. Rozwój społecznych umiejętności (soft skills) na zajęciach z języka angielskiego zawodowej specjalizacji (ESP) na wyższych uczelniach technicznych.**

*Omówiona została wzrastająca rola społecznych umiejętności, które nazywa się również «miękkimi umiejętnościami» (soft skills), dla przyszłej kariery zawodowej, ze względu na znaczne przemiany w istocie pracy i funkcjach zawodowych, zawodzie, miejscu pracy i czasie pracy w warunkach zmiennej gospodarki. Główną uwagę zwraca się w tym artykule na takie społeczne umiejętności, jak współpraca, komunikacja, krytyczne myślenie i rozwiązywanie problemów, a także sposoby ich rozwoju na zajęciach z języka angielskiego zawodowego profilu (ESP) na wyższych uczelniach technicznych. Rozpatrzono pewne ćwiczenia oparte na indywidualnym podejściu do uczniów, mające na celu kształtowanie w nich owych istotnych umiejętności społecznych. Dla oceny efektywności metod wykładania tych umiejętności, stosowanych w edukacyjnym module, poświęconym relacjom w akademickim i zawodowym środowisku, przeprowadzono wywiad wśród studentów pierwszego roku. Jego wyniki pokazują, że innowacyjne metody, takie jak gra fabularna, praca zespołowa i burza mózgów, z reguły postrzegane są przez studentów jako mniej atrakcyjne i efektywne zadania niż tradycyjne, na przykład czytanie czy tłumaczenie. Sformułowano wniosek, że konieczne są dodatkowe wysiłki, żeby wprowadzić ćwiczenia i zadania nastawione na uczniów dla rozwoju miękkich umiejętności.*

**Słowa kluczowe:** *miękkie umiejętności, socjalne kompetencje, język angielski, specjalizacja zawodowa, innowacyjne metody nauczania, podejście nastawione na uczniów.*

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#### **Information about the authors:**

**Lazareva Olga** – Doctor of Philosophy, Docent, Associate Professor at the Department of Foreign Languages, National Technical University «Kharkiv Polytechnic Institute».

**Kowtun Olena** – Associate Professor at the Department of Foreign Languages, National Technical University «Kharkiv Polytechnic Institute».