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Developing soft skills in adult learners of English in online courses: The case of Skyeng online school and Skyes digital platform

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The paper analyses the importance of soft skills for adult learners, provides examples of soft skills, valued by employers, examples of online courses aimed at developing soft skills, and focuses on the system of developing soft skills and resources, offered by Skyeng online school and Skyes digital platform for universities, used in several countries. The system offered is structured according to learner needs and course types and has been used by over one hundred thousand learners.

Key words: soft skills, online courses, EFL, ESL

1. Introduction

The importance of soft skills for work and life has been increasingly recognised in many countries. While there is no single exhaustive list of soft skills (though there are varying definitions of soft skills), they become increasingly recognised by employers as a key to employees' success in the workplace. Therefore, it is important to understand what the content of education should be, how soft skills can be taught, and consider already existing ways of creating a framework for developing soft skills.

Collins English dictionary defines soft skills as "Desirable qualities for certain forms of employment that do not depend on acquired knowledge: they include common sense, the ability to deal with people, and a positive flexible attitude". A more practice-oriented definition is offered by (Kenton, 2021), who defines soft skills as "character traits and interpersonal skills that characterize a person's relationships with other people. In the workplace, soft skills are considered to be a complement to hard skills, which refer to a person's knowledge and occupational skills." Soft skills are skills which are desirable in all professions; these include critical thinking, problem solving, public speaking, professional writing, teamwork, digital literacy, leadership, professional attitude, work ethic, career management and intercultural fluency. This is in contrast to hard skills, which are specific to individual professions (Claxton, Costa & Kallick, 2016; Lippman *et al.*, 2015).

1.1. Need for soft skills

Soft skills are regarded as very important in many countries, as recent research demonstrates. In the USA a survey, carried out in 2016 by the HR company Adecco Staffing, showed that 44% of executives (out of 500 senior executives surveyed) said that a lack of soft skills was the biggest proficiency gap they saw in the workforce. A report by Bloomberg in 2018 reveals that:

If recent graduates are not well-prepared for their new jobs, it is not because their hard skills are deficient. Some 90 percent of corporate respondents and 88 percent of academics surveyed said new recruits have the hard skills, such as computer literacy and written communication, to do their jobs successfully. But both groups, however, were far less satisfied with new employees' soft skills. Nearly four in 10 corporations and almost half of academic institutions said new hires lack the soft skills they need to perform at a high level ("Building Tomorrow's Talent: Collaboration Can Close Emerging Skills Gap", 2018, p.2).

The survey included 200 senior-level respondents, 100 from businesses and 100 from academia, and showed that 34% of corporate respondents and 44% of respondents from academic institutions believe that new recruits are prepared with hard skills but lack soft skills to be effective. The Global Trends Report-2019 by LinkedIn involved 5165 businesses in 35 countries, and 92% of respondents said that soft skills were as important as hard skills, while 30% of employers stated that it is more important to employ people based on their soft skills than hard skills. What's more, 89% of unsuccessful employees lack soft skills. It would appear that soft skills are becoming a key factor in employability and success at work. The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry in its 2019 Review of Australian Qualifications Framework Submission to the AQF Expert Panel states that soft skills should be a requirement for every qualification. This strongly correlates with the statement that "In the next ten years, soft-skill intensive occupations are expected to account for 63% of all jobs in Australia" made by AIM Business School CEO Ben Foote in Sky News business programme "The Ladder" in 2018. This demand makes soft skills an important part of learning content in professional education (Myers, 2021).

However, perception of the importance of soft skills varies from country to country. For example, in Russia soft skills are recognised as important, but digital skills (which are hard skills) are viewed as slightly more important than soft skills by Russian employers. ANCOR, an international staffing group, surveyed 373 CEOs and 4013 employees, who said that digital skills are among the very important skills that employees lack, and that the importance of digital skills is nearing that of soft skills (ANCOR press-release, 2021). Another survey, carried out in 2020 by OPORA Russia, included 526 employers, 63% of which stated that soft skills are key skills at work. This means that soft skills are recognised as desirable and may be part of teaching content in Russia as well as in other countries. Stek (2021) presents an educational soft skills experiment with IEM graduates, and it provides evidence that soft skills learning can effectively be introduced in existing courses. The graduates self-rated their competence levels of 36 soft skills before and after the course that provided soft skills workshops and a case study. In the first survey, "strategic thinking" ranked low and could be improved the most in the second survey.

Because of the rising importance of educational soft skills, the necessity to teach soft skills has become a major concern for educators and employers worldwide (Crowley, 2019). Because soft skills are poorly defined, teaching them is more challenging, compared to classical skills. For this reason, the

first step consists of understanding how to evaluate them, so that educators can track student progress.

As for teaching, evaluating soft skills is harder than technical skills. “Quizzes or exams cannot accurately measure interpersonal and leadership skills” (Zhang, 2012, p. 159). Group projects seem to be a good way to develop soft skills, but evaluating them still represents a major obstacle. Researchers consider peer evaluation a good compromise between working in groups and an objective evaluation. The research conducted on this topic reported both positive and negative results although with few participants “is an initial step in designing and validating a peer assessment scale” (Zhang, 2012, p. 161).

As Dell’ Aquilla et al. (2017) write,

soft skills are important to everyone in every context, as it entails the involvement of personal aspects within any relationship. Soft skills are important to students, as they are linked to job performances and career development; they are crucial for employees who need to manage their interactions and emotions in order to interact effectively with customers and get engaged with the workplace missions; for management and leadership skills, as they help lead teams towards common and shared goals, accomplish organisational missions and support organisations in their future directions and visions.

1.2. Soft skills as content of specialised courses

Online courses that have the words “soft skills” in their description are highly popular. For example, Coursera offers soft skills courses that have as many as 1-3.1 million students per course (e.g. the courses *Leading People and Teams* from University of Michigan with 330,000 students, or *Learning How to Learn: Powerful mental tools to help you master tough subjects* from McMaster University). Other examples of soft skills courses available on Coursera include: *Teamwork skills: Communicating Effectively in Groups* (offered by University of Colorado Boulder, 150 000 students), *Creative Thinking: Techniques and Tools for Success* (offered by Imperial college, London, with 190 000 students).

As we see, such courses are not job-specific, but they deal with universal skills. It is important to determine the soft skills that may be used as the content of soft-skills oriented courses.

Soft skills are more difficult to teach and to learn than hard skills, because hard skills are related to information and job skills, and therefore to specific knowledge and easily measurable performance outcomes, while soft skills are dependent on traits of character and strategies of behaviour and are difficult to measure. The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (2019) states: “It is very difficult to align soft skills with qualifications and to allocate them to competence levels”.

This means that for different businesses and positions the importance of particular soft skills may vary, which will affect the contents of the soft-skills oriented courses.

Various employees list different skills as important for their businesses, including communication, adaptability, leadership, persuasion, organization, teamwork, collaboration, problem-solving, time management, interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, stress management, creativity, active

listening, empathy, public speaking, social skills, critical thinking. The World Economic Forum provides a list of 35 soft skills in its Future of Jobs report and a list of top 15 skills in 2025 includes 10 soft skills and only 5 hard skills (The Future of Jobs Report 2020, p. 36). The article Soft skills — skills of the 21st century: what do employers value most of all in Russia and in the Perm region (2019), published by Higher School of Economics, Russia, lists the top 10 soft skills in the world and the top 10 soft skills in Russia.

Top 10 soft skills in the world	Top 10 soft skills in Russia
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ability to solve complex issues 2. Critical thinking 3. Creativity 4. Leadership 5. Coordination 6. Emotional intelligence 7. Decision making 8. Customer focus 9. Negotiating 10. Cognitive flexibility 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Active learning 2. Coordination 3. Negotiating 4. Teaching people 5. Information literacy 6. Customer focus 7. Oral communication 8. Ability to solve complex issues 9. Operational literacy 10. Time management

In comparison, the Boosters' (2020, p.3) study states that

there is a core of eight fundamental soft skills which are essential to most jobs. These are communication (written and oral), time management, decision making and judgment, team spirit, adaptability, analytical skills and autonomy. Beyond these fundamental soft skills, there are other, specific, soft skills which tend to be required in different jobs and functions. For example, for the Sales function, two of the most sought-after soft skills are “ambition” and “handling conflicts”. The number of soft skills required varies with the job function corresponding to the position recruited for: as an example, the Human Resources function requires the greatest number of soft skills (25) among all corporate functions. We also find that the soft skills required depend on the seniority of the position. As an example, senior management positions require more autonomy, initiative, people management, self-confidence, and strategic thinking.

This means that although there may be varying needs for soft skills depending on what kind of future job a course is aimed at, it is still possible to determine the core soft skills that may be used as the content focus of most courses. Based on comparison of the reports listed, we believe that the core skills should include the following, such as time management, planning and coordination, decision making, adaptability, ability to solve complex issues, teamwork, leadership, critical thinking, interpersonal skills, negotiating. Other skills may be added to help students reach their job-specific goals.

2. Incorporating development of soft skills in courses of the English language: a case of Skyeng courses

A separate soft skills course will require time and effort (separate soft skills courses on Coursera last, on average, 40 weeks per skill), and since a lot of soft skills are interpersonal, such courses need to

include a significant amount of communication. Therefore, it is possible to incorporate development of several soft skills into a course that focuses or heavily relies on communication. Courses of foreign languages are particularly well-suited for this purpose, as the experience of Skyeng, one of the largest online schools in Europe, demonstrates.

Skyeng is a large online school with divisions that develop and teach courses from preschool age and school-age students (Skysmart), to adult learners and offers courses on a university level. These courses are used by universities in Russia, Belarus, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Morocco, Pakistan, Peru, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, Vietnam, in total by more than 250 institutions, 2059 teachers and more than 37000 students as of November 2021.

Skyeng began in 2012 as a language school, offering English as a foreign language courses, but since 2020 it added courses for universities (both general English and English for Specific Purposes offered by Skyes for Universities platform), courses in other subjects for school students and in 2021 the school developed a platform and materials for 15 primary and secondary school subjects (Skysmart Class) and nanodegrees courses for those wanting to acquire new qualifications in computer programming, management and other subjects (Skypro university). As of November 2021, English courses alone are taught to over 110 000 students by about 12 000 teachers.

Skyeng develops soft skills through EFL and ESP courses for adult learners through a system of lessons and units.

The general stages of developing soft skills follow the same PPP (presentation, production and practice) model as a regular language course does:

1. Presentation: raising awareness of a soft skill and its uses through a communicative situation.
2. Production: teaching to use the skill through controlled exercises or case studies.
3. Practice: practicing the skill through exercises and situations that require it throughout the course.

A more detailed description of the methodology used in developing Skyeng courses is provided by Smyshlyak in “ESL/EFL online lesson development (based on Skyeng practices and techniques)”, (Smyshlyak, 2020), who demonstrates how General English lessons are created to cater for the learners’ needs and learning goals. Within one course, the choice of learning tools can vary from lesson to lesson, while remaining within the same lesson framework, depending not only the goals of the lessons, but on the goals of the students, with the lesson structure adapted to better get the content of the lesson across to the students. This means that although the PPP model prevails in the General English courses, it can be altered to accommodate particular goals and form of learning, like projects or case studies.

Stoyanova (2021) describes the principles of development of online courses of English for Specific Purposes and shows how the content of courses is selected according to the results of numerous customer development interviews, as well as field studies, which enable course developers to design courses that provide adult learners with the training that addresses their future employers’ needs and covers the fundamentals of the specific professional areas so that the courses are broad enough to prepare students for further professional development without focusing on one narrow job-specific

area only. Such methodological balance of content is viewed as a tool of personalisation of the courses.

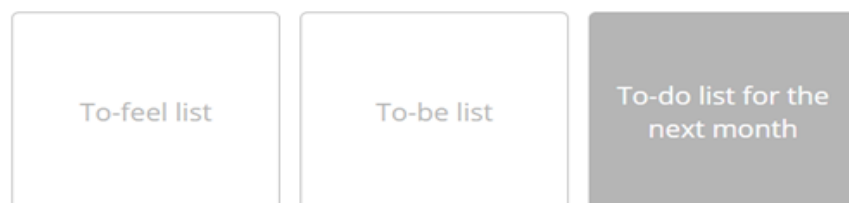
Konobeiev et al. (2020) describe the model of personalised learning used by Skyeng to offer personalisation on several levels: 1) the lesson, where certain exercises can be skipped or supplemented with other resources, 2) the entire course, where students can choose between fast track (covering the essentials of the programme only) and full track (covering each topic in detail), and 3) the level of the entire school where students can use a wide variety of extra resources, self-study courses and training apps to supplement their learning. Valkova (2020) mentions that students learning English with Skyeng courses become motivated and expand their vocabulary even when they use supplementary courses only.

It appears that Skyeng has developed a flexible model of creating personalised courses for adult learners that makes it possible for material writers to include different kinds of content into the lessons, and for students to decide on how much of the particular content they want to study as long as they meet the basic course requirements. This model seems convenient because it incorporates the development of soft skills in lessons and activities aimed at learning English, and at the same time makes soft skill practice a recurrent pattern in the course. However, the amount of soft skills depends on the type of course offered.

The Skyeng system of soft skills development through EFL/ESP courses is based on learners' needs. In General English courses there are lessons that include soft skills as secondary aims, while the main aim is to help students reach a certain level of proficiency in the English language. In the *New General English course*, soft skills are an integral part of every unit in most lessons. Exercises to develop soft skills play a supporting role in such lessons as students' goals in General English courses are less job-related than in professional courses. Therefore, the soft skills taught in such courses are more interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence and skills needed to communicate in cross-cultural settings in very broad contexts such as working in an international office and being aware of cultural features of co-workers. However, job-related soft skills are also taught through *New General Course* lessons. These skills are selected in such a way that they, too, would be useful in a variety of contexts, including everyday life. For example, students are taught to plan their daily schedules effectively and are provided with scaffolding to boost their planning skills. The following example (Image 1) from an elementary level lesson makes students consider what productivity means for them as well as what elements make up a productive routine; thus raising their awareness of the skill:

Create your lists to become more productive. Explain your points. The wordlist and questions in the cards might help you

If you are not ready to talk about yourself, you can create lists for someone you'd like to help become more productive: your friend, acquaintance, colleague or a film character.



- What would you like to achieve in the next month?
- What activities would you like to incorporate into your daily life?

Image 1. An exercise to help elementary students to focus on the soft skill of productivity

Then elementary level students are led to consider their own productivity:

Additional information 🗑️

Kim Kardashian

I usually wake up very early, at 6 o'clock. I **get dressed, make my bed, brush my hair**, and at 6.15, I go running — it gives me a lot of energy for the day. When I get home, I **take a shower**. At 8 o'clock, I wake my children up, and we have breakfast together. At 12.00, I have a couple of meetings. At 18.00, I **hang out** with my friends. At 21.00, I go to bed. When I can't **fall asleep**, I read some books or posts on Instagram.

You can also discuss 🗑️

- Whose schedule (Charles Darwin's, Sigmund Freud's, or Kim Kardashian's) is the best? Why?
- Who is more productive — a modern person or a person of the past? Why?

Image 2. Information and discussion questions to help elementary students focus on the soft skill of productivity

To make a transition from presentation to production, students compare how attitudes to productivity have changed over the past century and how these ideas compare to the ones that they may have had or have started to develop. After comparing and discussing routines of people from the past as well as modern people, they think about such questions as “What part of your routine is productive? What is not productive? How can you make it more productive?”. In the next lesson, they discuss and practise time management and organisation skills with the focus on making their routines more productive; thus putting the skills listed into a very personal perspective. Once again, this is done as a secondary aim to developing communication skills, (namely, learning how to make suggestions) which is a way to practise the soft skill in a language exercise:

Read the situation. Make three suggestions

Your teacher works a lot. Ask him/her to do something together in your free time. Give your teacher three options. You can choose some of the options from the list below or think of your own ones.

✓ **You can say:**

You are really creative. Let's draw together. I know that there is a master class in our park. I think it's really interesting.



Dance party

when: Friday, 21.00

where: Nightclub *Cherry*



Master class "How to understand wine"

when: Saturday, Sunday

where: Gorky Park



Sports club, group training

when: every Wednesday, 19.00

where: *ProSports* gym

Image 3. Incorporation of productivity development and communication practice in an elementary General English lesson

In the next lessons, students move on to working with interpersonal skills when discussing aspects of working in multinational companies. Students see from the experience of the lesson's character that working in multinational settings may be very beneficial (e.g., learning interesting information from around the world), but that they need to make an effort sometimes to bridge the cultural gap; thus becoming aware of the skill through exercises that further teach them how to practise it through communication. Examples of such lessons and exercises in the *New General English course* on different levels are numerous.

Since ESP courses are mostly meant for adult learners who already have a job or seek one. Soft skills in such courses become primary goals along with communication skills development, and there are entire units that heavily focus on the development of work-related soft skills. While in the *General English courses* students may remain unaware that they are actively acquiring certain soft skills (unless they read lesson descriptions), in ESP courses there are units dedicated to teaching particular soft skills.

For example, the *New Business English* course has, among others, units dedicated to team building, leadership, and project management.

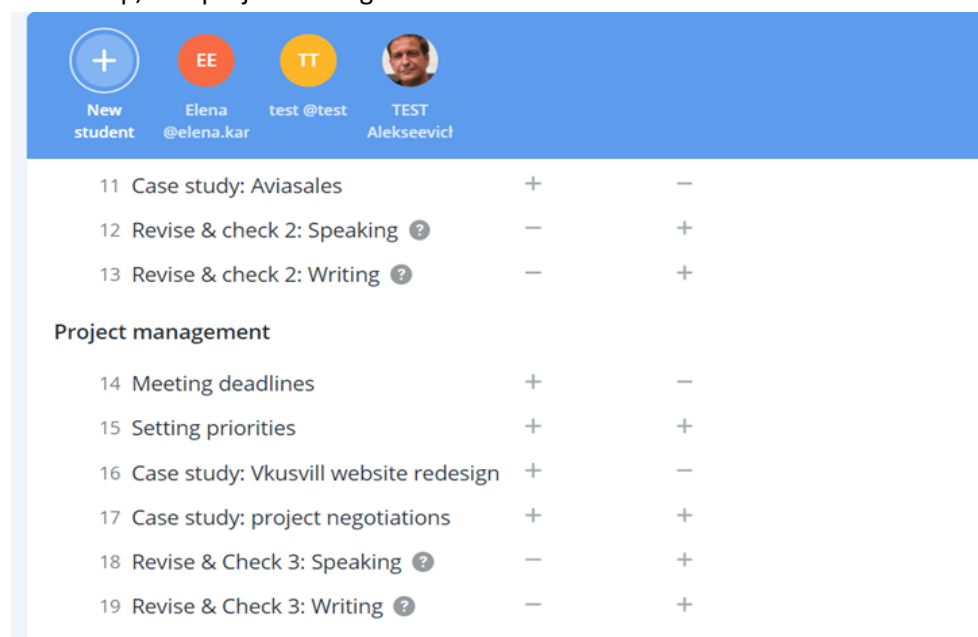


Image 4. The lessons in a “soft skills” unit in the *New Business Pre-Intermediate* course by Skyeng

The Project management unit in the *New Business English Pre-Intermediate course* centres on developing time management and organisation skills. Other units in the course help to develop negotiation skills, critical thinking, teamwork, collaboration and problem-solving skills. Most skills from the list are present in the *New Business English course* and are developed through case studies and role plays. Case studies help students to become aware of a lack of soft skills as a possible cause of failures in work and communication. By trying to solve real-life problems through case studies and focusing on the soft skills that are key to the solutions students become aware of their importance and learn to apply soft skills to a variety of professional situations. As we have mentioned earlier, in ESP courses the focus on soft skills is at least equally important as that on language learning.

Another course rich in soft skills, is the *Just Speak Course*. This course is available on two levels: upper-intermediate and advanced. The main goal of this course is to prepare students for a long stay and work in the USA (upper-intermediate level) and the UK (advanced level), so in a way it is a cross between an EFL and an ESP course. The course covers a wide range of everyday and work situations, it has a storyline where students trail the life of the main character, but then they roleplay a variety of situations and learn not only to speak English in these situations but also to deal with people, develop persuasion skills, critical thinking, social skills, public speaking, emotional intelligence, and many others that can be a valuable addition to the skills taught in the *New Business English course*, or an important preparation for life in a multicultural environment.

In another lesson of the *Just Speak Course*, Upper-Intermediate students learn about workplace culture. They think about their own expectations and habits; thus raising their awareness of teamwork as a skill:

Today's your big day. But how are you going to behave? As you're on tenterhooks, you start remembering all the pieces of advice your friends have ever given to you.

Tick the things that would be nice to do on your first day at work. Explain your choice

Things to do on the first working day:

- Arrive on time and dress well.
- Say "Hi" and introduce yourself to as many people as you can.
- Don't try too hard to befriend your colleagues.
- Skip lunch and do extra work.
- Listen and observe as much as possible.
- Learn the rules of the workspace.
- Don't show too much interest in everyone.
- Put your cell phone on silent mode.

Discuss the following dilemmas with your teacher. Provide arguments for your position

- 1 Your colleague asks you to cover for them while they leave early to go to their child's school concert. They do not have the manager's permission to leave early. Do you agree? If they leave anyway, do you keep silent?
- 2 Company policy forbids co-workers to become romantically involved. You become romantically attracted to a colleague, and you know the feeling is mutual. What are you going to do?
- 3 While in the restroom, you accidentally overhear your boss speaking on the phone. They say that they're planning to fire an employee at the end of the quarter. That employee is your friend. What are you going to do?
- 4 The new employee is really lazy, never showing up to work on time, always leaving early and asking other people to do their job for them. When you complain about them to your manager, they say the employee is a child of the president of the company. Later, the employee makes a mistake that puts you in trouble and ruins the project's deadline. What are you going to do?

Image 5. (left) Raising students' awareness of cultural expectations in the workplace and (right) using moral dilemmas to build interpersonal skills

And after learning about - and practising - interpersonal skills in the office, they move on to more difficult issues - ethical dilemmas that can be important in building working relationships with colleagues and adhering to rules as well. They face dilemmas and then learn about working rules and expectations. Not only do such exercises provide excellent basis for communication, but they also help to develop emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills, and collaboration skills.

Teaching English to university students also has its own features and specifics. On the one hand, students need a good course in General English to prepare them for taking up a course in English for their future job. On the other hand, first-year, and sometimes second-year students have a particular need for lessons that would teach them how to study at universities. The ability to study consists not only of certain learning strategies and a knowledge of how the university operates, but it also requires such skills as planning, time management, teamwork, collaboration, problem-solving, interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, stress management, creativity, active listening, empathy, public speaking, social skills, critical thinking - in short, many of the skills listed by businesses as highly desirable for potential employees. Therefore, it is important to include teaching these skills in university-level courses.

The Skyes for Universities digital platform contains entire courses, special trainers and sets of interactive exercises, most of which have been developed for university students. The core Skyes courses are general English courses with a focus on academic skills, supplemented by ESP courses that students need for their future jobs. On top of these courses, sets of training exercises (for example, vocabulary trainers, grammar trainers, pronunciation trainers) and short courses are available for the students to choose from to help them solve particular problems and close gaps in their school education.

A large part of Skylike courses is dedicated to teaching soft skills in a way that is relevant to university and college students. In the *Skylike A2 course* (Alexiou et al, 2020), the key skill is planning, when students learn to plan their time and work in a variety of settings and contexts. Students learn how to use different planning tools, including digital calendars like Google calendar, they learn how to schedule their time to prepare for exams, they learn and practice creation of SMART goals (Specific,

Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) and put this new skill to practice in their own university setting:

Match the words with the questions

Measurable	How do I know that it is achieved (numbers, measures)?
Relevant	How much time do I have/need?
Achievable	What can I do to achieve it?
Time-based	What good things will happen when I achieve it?
Specific	What exactly do I want to achieve?

Choose a goal or write your own. Make it SMART

1

I want to go on a nice trip this year

2

I want to make a nice surprise for my friend

3

I want to win in a sports competition

My own goal:

Image 6: tasks to help to create SMART goals. Skylike A2

Even though most of Skyes course content focuses on academic contexts, soft skills are practised in non-academic courses as well, as they are needed not only for work purposes, but in the daily life as well:

Read the text and complete it with the missing words

in advance convenient overnight reservation sightseeing

Travelling tips

1 Transportation



First, choose the way you'll travel. Think, what is more for you: taking a plane is faster, but trains are usually cheaper.

The main thing is that you should book your tickets , that way you can save money and be sure that you'll start your trip the day you want.

2 Accommodation



There are different types of accommodation you can choose from hostels, hotels or apartments.

If you just need to stay , a hostel may be the best option. If you want to have a more comfortable stay, think about a hotel. A good thing about an apartment is that you have a kitchen to cook in, so you can spend less money on restaurants. No matter what you choose, don't forget to

Read the rules and complete the example

Rules

- You have €1,000 to spend on your trip.
- You can't spend more money than you have.
- You should start and finish in your city.
- You can spend as many days as you want in any city.
- You can do only 1 activity in 1 day.
- You should have food every day.
- If you fly to a city, you should have accommodation there.

We have a comfortable holiday with a lot of sightseeing. So, we decided to go to Paris first. We to stay in a hotel and eat in a restaurant. We are planning to spend two days there. On the first day, we'll go on an excursion, and on our second day, we'll go up the Eiffel Tower. It will cost us €485. So, we'll have €315 more left. Our next place to visit will be Barcelona. go there by plane...

Image 7: (left) Applying planning skill to traveling, Skylike A2 and (right) limiting conditions in a planning task in Skylike A2

To make such planning practice realistic and help students learn to make their own life plans, exercises include certain limitations, like limited funds, limited time and several other conditions.

As it has been mentioned earlier, Skyes courses consist of units dedicated to developing such soft skills for academics, as Planning, Exam preparation, Networking at the university, Cross-cultural collaboration to study, Critical thinking and others. In the rest of the units, soft skills are incorporated in the lessons, but do not control the contents of the entire units.

The Skyeng system of developing soft skills in adult learners through teaching English may be represented in the following table:

Type of courses	Types of soft skills	How soft skills are taught
General English	Interpersonal, emotional intelligence, organisational, time management as applied to everyday life	As secondary goals in lessons
ESP (professional + Business English)	Time management, leadership, collaboration, persuasion etc with focus on work	As primary goals in entire units and lessons
English for university students	Planning, exam preparation, networking at the university, cross-cultural collaboration to study, critical thinking for academic purposes	As part of nearly every communication exercise

Table 1. Skyeng system of developing soft skills through EFL/ESP courses

It is important to note that students may choose to supplement courses with lessons or units from other courses. For example, a New General English lesson, where soft skills are secondary, can be supplemented by an entire unit from the New Business English course and thus continue acquiring soft skills as long as he/she deems fit.

Such a system allows to develop soft skills in adult learners in accordance with their interests and needs and without shifting the focus of studies away from the students' goals.

3. Pedagogical implications

The model of developing soft skills through online EFL/ESL courses for adult learners, used by Skyeng online school and Skyes digital platform for universities, shows that soft skills can be taught as part and parcel of more general English-language courses. Soft skills for teaching can be selected, based on research in job markets. This research shows that, although the sets of soft skills that are valued in a particular country, can be more or less unified, they can differ greatly in particular industries, with different companies valuing different subsets of soft skills. Therefore, when developing courses of English for adult learners, it is important to take into account not only the broad content of international industries, but also expectations and requirements of a particular industry in the country

where this course is going to be implemented. Also, it is important to use a course design that will allow students to focus more on the skills that they feel they need and less on the ones that they do not expect to benefit from, while still meeting the basic requirements of the programme.

The PPP model offers a convenient framework to implement the development of soft skills in such courses on different levels. At the same time, other methods and techniques can be used, like CLIL to integrate professional content and language learning, and to better meet the goals of adult learners. Many soft skills like leadership, coordination, customer focus, negotiating and ability to solve complex issues, are more connected to job situations. Therefore, CLIL and ESP courses seem to be particularly well-suited for the task.

Soft skills may require an extensive use of such tasks as debates, critical analysis and evaluation of information, planning and time management activities, case studies with real-life cases when goals were not achieved because of a lack or insufficient application of soft skills. Cross-cultural communication cases can be particularly useful in building strong interpersonal skills as well as persuasion and leadership skills. The wide range of soft skills makes it necessary to use a wide range of techniques in a soft-skills inclusive course.

It is important to further research the comparative effectiveness of different levels of teaching soft skills (lesson level vs unit level) and to select content for ESP courses for different professions regarding development of soft skills in adult learners of English. Also, the next steps in research may include categorisation of soft skills into those that can be best taught through General English courses and those that can be demonstrated through job-related situations. Such research will help to select teaching content more carefully and to match it to the requirements of particular industries and learners. A study to compare the effectiveness of different strategies of teaching soft skills is also needed to select more precisely the teaching tools to be used in such courses. For this research the experience and teaching model of Skyeng courses can be useful.

4. Concluding remarks

As shown above, soft skills are becoming an important component of teaching content for adult learners, as they are required in many jobs. Even though different jobs require different skills, it is still possible to determine core soft skills that can be used as a basis for soft skills-oriented courses or courses. Online courses aimed at development of separate soft skills are offered by various institutions and some of such courses are highly popular. However, these courses require time, while development of soft skills is based on communication. Therefore, it is possible to incorporate development of soft skills in EFL and ESP online courses for adult learners, as Skyeng experience demonstrates.

The PPP model allows a smooth implementation of soft skills in EFL and ESP online courses. Depending on the learners' needs, soft skills can be taught on a lesson level, when they become part and parcel of exercises and activities of a lesson, as well as on a unit level, when entire units are dedicated to development of particular soft skills.

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