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DEVELOPING SOFT SKILLS IN EFL CLASSROOMS: INTEGRATING 21ST-CENTURY COMPETENCIES INTO ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

Abstract

Today's graduates need more than subject knowledge — they need soft skills: critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and emotional intelligence. Yet language classrooms are still widely treated as places where only linguistic outcomes matter. This article argues that EFL lessons are powerful and underutilised spaces for developing soft skills alongside language competence. Drawing on the Cambridge Life Competencies Framework (2020), the Oxford Global Skills position paper (Mercer et al., 2019), and the CASEL model of Social-Emotional Learning as applied to ELT by Pentón Herrera (2024), together with empirical studies by Hadiyanto (2021) and Wicaksono and Saraswati (2024), the article examines how communicative tasks can advance both linguistic and competency goals simultaneously. The review finds that well-designed tasks — those built on genuine learner interdependence, creative problem-solving, and shared outcomes — consistently produce measurable gains in 21st-century competencies alongside language development. Deliberate pedagogical intention, rather than incidental exposure, is identified as the decisive factor in soft-skill growth. Five evidence-based classroom strategies are discussed in detail: Structured Academic Controversy, Collaborative Inquiry Projects, Reflective Journaling, Literature Circles and Socratic Seminars, and Peer Feedback. Assessment approaches that go beyond test scores — including portfolios, self-assessment, and process documentation — are also addressed. The article concludes that integrating soft skills into English teaching is not a pedagogical luxury but a core responsibility of language education.

Keywords: *soft skills; EFL classroom; 21st-century competencies; critical thinking; collaboration; social-emotional learning; task-based learning; communicative language teaching; teacher development; competency assessment.*

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Аннотация

Современным специалистам нужны не только предметные знания, но и умение думать критически, общаться, сотрудничать и управлять своими эмоциями. Тем не менее языковые классы по-прежнему нередко ориентированы исключительно на лингвистические результаты, оставляя в стороне развитие личностных компетенций. Данная статья показывает, что урок английского языка как иностранного (EFL) представляет собой полноценную и недостаточно используемую среду для развития мягких навыков наряду с языковой компетенцией. Опираясь на Кембриджскую систему жизненных компетенций (2020), позиционный документ Oxford Global Skills (Mercer et al., 2019), модель социально-

эмоционального обучения CASEL в применении к преподаванию языка (Pentón Herrera, 2024), а также эмпирические исследования Hadiyanto (2021) и Wicaksono и Saraswati (2024), в статье рассматривается, каким образом коммуникативные задания способны одновременно продвигать как языковые, так и компетентностные цели. Установлено, что задания, построенные на подлинной взаимозависимости учащихся, совместном решении проблем и общем результате, дают измеримый прирост компетенций XXI века наряду с языковым развитием. Ключевым фактором роста мягких навыков является осознанная педагогическая позиция, а не случайное воздействие. В статье подробно обсуждаются пять стратегий: структурированная академическая дискуссия, проекты совместного исследования, рефлексивный дневник, литературные кружки и сократовские семинары, а также взаимное рецензирование. Рассматриваются и подходы к оцениванию, выходящие за рамки тестовых показателей. Делается вывод о том, что интеграция мягких навыков в преподавание английского языка является не педагогической роскошью, а основной ответственностью языкового образования.

Ключевые слова: мягкие навыки; EFL-класс; компетенции XXI века; критическое мышление; сотрудничество; социально-эмоциональное обучение; обучение на основе заданий; коммуникативное обучение языку; профессиональное развитие учителя; оценивание компетенций.

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Аңдатпа

Бүгінгі заман мамандарынан тек пәндік білім емес, сыни ойлау, ынтымақтасу, шығармашылық және эмоционалдық интеллект сияқты жұмсақ дағдылар да талап етіледі. Алайда тіл сабақтары әлі де жиі тек лингвистикалық нәтижеге бағытталып, тұлғалық құзыреттерді дамытуды назардан тыс қалдырады. Осы мақала шетел тілі ретінде ағылшын тілі (EFL) сабақтарының тілдік құзыретпен қатар жұмсақ дағдыларды дамытудың толыққанды және жеткілікті пайдаланылмай жатқан кеңістігі бола алатынын дәлелдейді. Мақала Кембридж өмірлік құзыреттер жүйесіне (2020), Oxford Global Skills позициялық құжатына (Mercer et al., 2019), CASEL әлеуметтік-эмоционалдық оқыту моделінің тілді оқытуға қолданылуына (Pentón Herrera, 2024), сондай-ақ Hadiyanto (2021) мен Wicaksono және Saraswati (2024) эмпирикалық зерттеулеріне сүйенеді. Зерттеу нәтижелері шынайы өзара тәуелділікке, бірлескен мәселе шешуге және ортақ нәтижеге негізделген тапсырмалардың тіл дамуымен қатар XXI ғасыр құзыреттерінің өлшенетін өсімін тұрақты қамтамасыз ететінін көрсетеді. Жұмсақ дағдылардың өсуінің шешуші факторы — кездейсоқ ықпал емес, саналы педагогикалық ниет. Мақалада бес стратегия егжей-тегжейлі талқыланады: құрылымдық академиялық қарама-қайшылық, бірлескен зерттеу жобалары, рефлексиялық күнделік, әдебиет шеңберлері мен Сократтық семинарлар, сондай-ақ теңдестерден кері байланыс. Тест нәтижелерінен тыс бағалау тәсілдері де қарастырылады. Жұмсақ дағдыларды ағылшын тілін оқытуға интеграциялау педагогикалық артықшылық емес, тіл білімінің негізгі міндеті екені туралы қорытынды жасалады.

Түйін сөздер: жұмсақ дағдылар; EFL сыныбы; XXI ғасыр құзыреттері; сыни ойлау; ынтымақтастық; әлеуметтік-эмоционалдық оқыту; тапсырмаға негізделген оқыту; коммуникативтік тіл оқыту; мұғалімді кәсіби дамыту; құзыреттерді бағалау.

Introduction

Across hiring offices, university admissions panels, and professional development surveys, a remarkably consistent message has emerged over the past two decades: what distinguishes effective graduates is not primarily what they know, but how they think, communicate, and work alongside others. Academic credentials alone are no longer enough [1; 2].

Language classrooms occupy an unusual position in this landscape. Unlike other disciplines, English cannot be learned in isolation — it demands interaction, negotiation, risk-taking, and the willingness to be uncertain in front of others. Every time a student defends a position in a discussion, gives feedback on a classmate's writing, or works through a disagreement in a group task, something is happening that extends well beyond grammar or vocabulary. These conditions, when shaped with deliberate pedagogical intent, constitute a powerful environment for soft-skill development [3].

This article draws together the theoretical and empirical strands that help explain this potential. Three questions guide the review: What frameworks currently inform soft-skill integration in EFL contexts? Which classroom strategies develop 21st-century competencies alongside language skills? And how might growth in these areas be meaningfully assessed?

Methods

The article is grounded in a narrative literature review covering publications from 2019 to 2024. Relevant sources were identified through searches of Google Scholar, ERIC, and publisher repositories, using terms such as "soft skills EFL," "21st-century competencies language teaching," "critical thinking EFL," and "social-emotional learning ELT."

Three competency frameworks served as the theoretical foundation. The Cambridge Life Competencies Framework (2020) [1] organises six domains — creative thinking, critical thinking, learning to learn, communication, collaboration, and social responsibilities — and treats proficiency and competency development as mutually reinforcing. The Oxford Global Skills position paper [2] foregrounds adaptability, digital literacy, and learners' capacity to take genuine ownership of their development. The CASEL model of Social-Emotional Learning, applied to ELT by Pentón Herrera (2024) [5], reframes emotional and social intelligence as constitutive elements of literacy today.

Two empirical studies received sustained attention. Hadiyanto (2021) [3] tracked soft-skill outcomes across different EFL task types in an Indonesian higher education context. Wicaksono and Saraswati (2024) [4] examined the practical opportunities and obstacles involved in embedding SEL into language teaching.

Results

The reviewed literature organises around two broad patterns, each with direct implications for classroom practice.

The first concerns the relationship between task design and what students actually develop. Hadiyanto's findings [3] are instructive: tasks that required genuine group interaction, creative problem-solving, and shared outputs consistently produced measurable gains in 21st-century skill performance alongside language development. What distinguished high-yield tasks from weaker ones was their degree of genuine interdependence — activities where students actually needed each other to succeed generated substantially stronger competency outcomes.

The second pattern concerns social-emotional learning. Wicaksono and Saraswati [4] identify real affordances: the human content of English materials — stories, films, discussions about identity and culture — creates natural openings for emotional reflection that few other subjects can match. However, teacher preparation for SEL facilitation is often inadequate, and in examination-driven systems, pressure to prioritise measurable linguistic outcomes can be considerable.

Across both patterns, a single variable emerges as decisive: deliberate pedagogical design. Soft skills do not develop as a byproduct of exposure to English; they develop when tasks are explicitly constructed to demand them. Five strategies recur across the reviewed literature as effective vehicles for this work.

1. Structured Academic Controversy: students argue a position, then switch sides, then work collaboratively toward a synthesis — building critical thinking, perspective-taking, and substantive language use in the same activity.

2. Collaborative Inquiry Projects: students gain extended, authentic experience of working toward a shared goal, with the productive friction that real collaboration entails.

3. Reflective Journaling: even briefly at the close of a lesson, this cultivates self-awareness and metacognitive monitoring that underlie both emotional intelligence and language learning.

4. Literature Circles and Socratic Seminars: these reposition students as active meaning-makers rather than recipients of teacher-delivered interpretation.

5. Peer Feedback: when explicitly taught rather than assumed, this builds relationship skills and meta-linguistic awareness that transfer well beyond the language classroom.

Discussion

The findings reviewed above point with reasonable consistency in one direction: language learning and soft-skill development tend to reinforce rather than crowd out each other. When tasks demand genuine communication, real collaboration, and substantive thinking, students develop both sets of capacities together. This reframes the choice facing EFL practitioners: integrating competency goals is not a trade-off against linguistic outcomes — under thoughtful task design, it is a genuine gain for both [1; 3].

The assessment question is perhaps the most persistent challenge. Critical thinking is contextually variable; collaboration looks different across cultures; neither reduces cleanly to a numerical score. What the literature suggests works best is a combination of methods: evidence portfolios built over time, self and peer-assessment structured by explicit reflection prompts, and process documentation — observation notes, recorded discussions, written reflections — that captures what end-of-unit tests cannot.

The cultural dimension raises a different set of concerns. The major frameworks reviewed — Cambridge, Oxford, CASEL — emerged primarily from Western educational traditions, and their assumptions about communication, emotional expression, and collaborative behaviour are not universally shared. Teachers working across cultural contexts need to hold these frameworks with some critical distance [2].

Finally, teacher development emerges as a systemic precondition. Soft-skill facilitation cannot be reduced to a set of techniques; it depends on the quality of the relational and intellectual environment that teachers create. Professional development that builds educators' own critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and capacity for genuine collaboration is foundational [4].

Conclusion

The case made in this article rests on three interlocking arguments. The practical argument: the modern world consistently requires capacities — critical thinking, collaboration, communication, emotional regulation — that the EFL classroom is unusually well-positioned to develop. The pedagogical argument: soft-skill development and language development are not competing priorities; under the right conditions, they advance together. The ethical argument: education that engages the whole person better serves the human beings in front of the teacher.

The five strategies outlined — Structured Academic Controversy, Collaborative Inquiry Projects, Reflective Journaling, Literature Circles, and Peer Feedback — are in most cases

reworkings of activities that thoughtful language teachers are already using. What changes with deliberate soft-skill integration is intention: the explicit decision to notice, name, and develop competency growth alongside linguistic growth.

Several areas warrant further research. The longitudinal transfer of soft skills from EFL contexts to professional settings remains underexplored. The cultural responsiveness of existing assessment instruments is a pressing concern. And the design of teacher preparation programmes that build the competencies underpinning effective soft-skill facilitation deserves sustained attention.

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