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INTEGRATION OF SOFT SKILLS INTO LANGUAGE TEACHING AT HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS: A COMPETENCE-BASED DIMENSION

ІНТЕГРАЦІЯ SOFT SKILLS У ПРОЦЕС ВИКЛАДАННЯ МОВИ У ЗАКЛАДІ ВИЩОЇ ОСВІТИ: КОМПЕТЕНТІСНИЙ ВИМІР

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The article deals the theoretical and practical foundations of integrating soft skills into the process of language teaching in higher education institutions through the lens of the competence-based approach. Contemporary transformations in the educational sphere, driven by globalization, digitalization, intercultural mobility, and labor market demands, highlight the need to develop not only subject-specific linguistic knowledge but also a set of transferable skills among higher education students. Communication skills, critical thinking, creativity, teamwork, emotional intelligence, and the ability to engage in self-reflection are becoming integral components of professional competence. In this context, language education serves as an effective environment for the development of soft skills, as it involves active interpersonal interaction, argumentation, interpretation, and the production of texts of various genres.

The purpose of the article is to identify the pedagogical conditions and methodological strategies for integrating soft skills into the process of teaching a foreign language in higher education institutions, as well as to determine their role in the formation of key and professional competencies of students.

The integration of soft skills into language education implies a shift from the reproductive acquisition of linguistic material to an activity-based, communicatively oriented model of instruction. Effective tools include project-based learning, problem-based learning, case studies, debates, role-playing and business simulations, interactive discussions, and reflective tasks. These forms of work contribute to the development of learner autonomy, responsibility for learning outcomes, and the ability to engage in intercultural communication. Particular attention is paid to the formation of communicative competence in combination with social and emotional components, which ensures the integrity of professional training.

The article substantiates that the competence-based dimension of language education involves the integration of knowledge, skills, values, and personal qualities necessary for successful professional realization. The importance of systematically incorporating soft skills into curricula, developing criteria for their assessment, and enhancing teachers' methodological readiness to implement the competence-based approach is emphasized.

Thus, the integration of soft skills into the process of language teaching in higher education institutions is an essential condition for preparing competitive specialists capable of effectively functioning in a dynamic socio-professional environment.

Key words: soft skills, competence-based approach, language education, professional competence, interactive teaching methods, communicative competence, higher education institution.

У статті розглядаються теоретичні та практичні засади інтеграції soft skills у процес викладання мови у закладі вищої освіти крізь призму компетентнісного підходу. Сучасні трансформації освітнього простору, зумовлені глобалізаційними процесами, цифровізацією, міжкультурною мобільністю та вимогами ринку праці, актуалізують необхідність формування у здобувачів вищої освіти не лише предметних мовних знань, а й комплексу надпрофесійних умінь. Комунікативність, критичне мислення, креативність, вміння працювати в команді, емоційний інтелект та здатність до саморефлексії стають невід'ємними складниками професійної компетентності майбутніх фахівців. У цьому контексті мовна підготовка виступає ефективним середовищем для розвитку soft skills, оскільки передбачає активну міжособистісну взаємодію, аргументацію, інтерпретацію та створення різножанрових текстів.

Мета статті полягає у визначенні педагогічних умов та методичних стратегій інтеграції soft skills у процес викладання іноземної мови у закладі вищої освіти, а також у з'ясуванні їх ролі у формуванні ключових і професійних компетентностей здобувачів освіти.

Інтеграція soft skills у мовну освіту передбачає переорієнтацію навчального процесу з репродуктивного засвоєння мовного матеріалу на діяльнішу, комунікативно спрямовану модель навчання. Ефективними інструментами виступають проєктні технології, проблемно-орієнтоване навчання, кейс-метод, дебати, рольові та ділові ігри, інтерактивні дискусії, а також рефлексивні завдання. Зазначені форми роботи сприяють розвитку автономності студентів, відповідальності за результати власної діяльності та здатності до міжкультурної комунікації. Важливу роль відіграє формування мовленнєвої компетентності у поєднанні з соціальною та емоційною складовими, що забезпечує цілісність професійної підготовки.

У статті обґрунтовано, що компетентнісний вимір мовної освіти передбачає інтеграцію знань, умінь, цінностей і особистісних якостей, необхідних для успішної професійної реалізації. Наголошено на доцільності системного впровадження soft skills у навчальні програми, розроблення критеріїв їх оцінювання та підвищення методичної готовності викладачів до реалізації компетентнісного підходу.

Отже, інтеграція soft skills у процес викладання мови у закладі вищої освіти є важливою умовою підготовки конкурентоспроможних фахівців, здатних ефективно діяти в умовах динамічного соціально-професійного середовища.

Ключові слова: soft skills, компетентнісний підхід, мовна освіта, професійна компетентність, інтерактивні методи навчання, комунікативна компетентність, заклад вищої освіти.

Introduction. The rapid transformation of contemporary society, driven by globalization, digitalization, technological innovation, and increasing intercultural interaction, has significantly reshaped the requirements imposed on higher education systems. Modern labor markets no longer prioritize subject-specific knowledge alone; instead, they emphasize a balanced combination of professional expertise and transferable competencies that enable graduates to adapt to dynamic socio-economic conditions. Among these competencies, soft skills – including communication, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, adaptability, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving – have gained particular prominence. Consequently, higher educational institutions face the urgent task of reconsidering traditional instructional models and aligning them with the competence-based paradigm of education.

Language teaching at higher educational institutions occupies a unique and strategic position within this transformation. Unlike many other academic disciplines, language education inherently involves communication, interaction, reflection, and intercultural exchange. It creates authentic opportunities for students to develop not only linguistic competence but also a wide range of interpersonal and cognitive skills. Through discussions, debates, project work, presentations, collaborative tasks, and analytical activities, language classes naturally foster the development of communicative competence, teamwork abilities, leadership qualities, and independent thinking. Therefore, the integration of soft skills into language teaching is not an external addition to the curriculum but rather an organic extension of its objectives.

The competence-based approach, which underpins contemporary educational reforms, shifts the focus from the transmission of knowledge to the formation of integrated competencies that combine knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values. Within this framework, learning outcomes are defined not merely by what students know, but by what they are able to do in real-life

professional and social contexts. In language education, this implies moving beyond grammar-centered instruction toward communicatively oriented, student-centered, and activity-based methodologies that simulate authentic professional situations and encourage meaningful interaction.

However, the effective integration of soft skills into language teaching requires systematic methodological support, clearly defined learning outcomes, appropriate assessment criteria, and teachers' readiness to implement innovative pedagogical strategies. It also necessitates reconsidering curriculum design to ensure that soft skills development is embedded in learning tasks rather than treated as an implicit by-product of instruction.

Given these challenges and opportunities, the issue of integrating soft skills into language teaching within the competence-based dimension becomes particularly relevant. Exploring pedagogical conditions, methodological tools, and practical strategies for such integration contributes to enhancing the quality of higher education and preparing competitive graduates capable of effective communication, critical analysis, and professional self-realization in a rapidly changing global environment.

Analysis of contemporary scientific papers. The issue of integrating soft skills into higher education has been widely discussed in contemporary pedagogical and interdisciplinary research. Numerous scholars emphasize that the transition from a knowledge-based to a competence-based educational paradigm requires a systematic reconsideration of learning objectives, teaching methods, and assessment strategies. Within this context, soft skills are interpreted as transferable competencies that ensure graduates' adaptability, employability, and professional mobility in rapidly changing labor markets [1;2;3].

Recent studies in educational sciences highlight that soft skills development should not be limited to specialized training courses but must be embedded across the curriculum. Researchers underline the

importance of communicative competence, critical thinking, collaboration, leadership, and emotional intelligence as essential components of holistic professional training [3, p. 111–115]. In particular, European and international frameworks for key competences for lifelong learning stress the integration of social, civic, and intercultural competencies into higher education programs.

In the field of language education, contemporary scientific papers demonstrate a growing interest in the interconnection between communicative language teaching and soft skills formation. Scholars argue that foreign language classrooms provide a natural environment for fostering interpersonal communication, teamwork, negotiation skills, and intercultural awareness. The communicative approach, task-based learning, project-based instruction, and problem-oriented methodologies are considered effective pedagogical tools for combining linguistic objectives with the development of transferable skills [6, p. 192–196].

A number of researchers also focus on the role of active and interactive teaching methods in promoting soft skills. Empirical studies confirm that debates, simulations, case studies, collaborative projects, and reflective practices significantly enhance students' autonomy, responsibility, and critical reasoning abilities [4]. Moreover, digital learning environments and blended learning models are increasingly viewed as platforms for cultivating adaptability, digital literacy, and self-regulated learning [5].

At the same time, contemporary literature points to several challenges in implementing soft skills integration. Among the most frequently discussed issues are the lack of clear assessment criteria, insufficient methodological training of instructors, and the tendency to treat soft skills as implicit learning outcomes rather than explicitly structured components of curricula. Some scholars emphasize the need for developing measurable indicators and rubrics that would allow educators to evaluate the formation of soft skills alongside linguistic competence [7, p. 533–544].

Despite the substantial body of research devoted to competence-based education and communicative language teaching, the systematic integration of soft skills into language instruction at higher educational institutions still requires further theoretical justification and practical modeling [8]. In particular, there remains a need to define pedagogical conditions, methodological frameworks, and assessment tools that would ensure the purposeful and consistent development of soft skills within language courses [9, p. 200–112].

Thus, the analysis of contemporary scientific papers confirms the growing recognition of soft skills as a fundamental dimension of higher education and

highlights the strategic role of language teaching in their development. However, it also reveals the necessity for further research aimed at conceptualizing and operationalizing the competence-based integration of soft skills into language education.

The purpose of the article is to examine the theoretical and methodological foundations of integrating soft skills into language teaching at higher educational institutions within the competence-based framework, and to identify the most effective pedagogical strategies that ensure the systematic development of transferable competencies alongside linguistic proficiency. The study aims to determine how communicative, cognitive, and interpersonal skills can be purposefully embedded into language curricula in order to enhance students' professional readiness, adaptability, and intercultural competence.

The findings of this research may contribute to the further development of competence-based language education and provide practical guidance for university teachers, curriculum designers, and educational policymakers seeking to modernize language instruction in accordance with contemporary labor market demands. The results can also serve as a methodological basis for improving assessment models that measure not only language acquisition but also the formation of soft skills in higher education settings.

The following **methods** were employed in the course of this study: theoretical analysis of contemporary scientific literature, comparative analysis of pedagogical approaches, descriptive method for systematizing key concepts, elements of pedagogical observation, and the method of interpretative analysis for evaluating the effectiveness of selected teaching strategies.

Presenting of main material. The transformation of higher education in the twenty-first century is closely connected with profound social, economic, and technological changes that redefine the expectations placed on university graduates. Rapid globalization, digital communication, interdisciplinary cooperation, and the growing mobility of professionals have created a labor market in which knowledge alone is no longer sufficient. Employers increasingly prioritize the ability to communicate effectively, work collaboratively, think critically, adapt to change, and demonstrate emotional intelligence. These transferable abilities, commonly referred to as soft skills, have become essential components of professional competence. Within this context, higher educational institutions are challenged to reconsider traditional teaching models and to implement competence-based approaches that integrate both subject-specific expertise and soft skills

development. Language teaching, due to its communicative and interactive nature, provides a particularly productive environment for achieving this integration.

The competence-based dimension of education shifts the focus from the mere transmission of knowledge to the formation of integrated competencies that combine knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes. In language education, this means that grammatical accuracy and vocabulary acquisition, although important, are no longer viewed as final objectives. Instead, the ultimate goal is to enable students to use language as a tool for meaningful interaction, professional communication, problem-solving, and intercultural dialogue. Consequently, language courses at higher educational institutions must be designed not only to develop linguistic competence but also to cultivate communication skills, teamwork abilities, leadership qualities, and critical thinking.

Soft skills are multidimensional in nature. Communication skills involve the ability to express ideas clearly, listen actively, negotiate meaning, and adjust discourse according to context. Critical thinking includes analytical reasoning, evaluation of information sources, and the capacity to construct logical arguments. Collaboration requires respect for diverse perspectives, conflict resolution skills, and shared responsibility for outcomes. Adaptability and resilience enable individuals to function effectively in uncertain or rapidly changing environments. Emotional intelligence supports empathy, self-regulation, and constructive interpersonal interaction. All these components can be naturally embedded into language teaching through carefully selected pedagogical strategies.

Traditional language instruction often relied on teacher-centered methodologies focused on grammar drills, translation exercises, and controlled practice. While such methods contribute to structural accuracy, they offer limited opportunities for developing transferable competencies. In contrast, communicative language teaching, task-based learning, and project-based instruction create authentic contexts in which language becomes a means of achieving meaningful objectives. For instance, students may be asked to design a collaborative project addressing a global issue, prepare a presentation, and defend their position during a discussion. *Students work in small groups to prepare a proposal for reducing plastic waste on campus and present their solutions in English to a simulated university board.* In such activities, learners simultaneously practice language structures and develop teamwork, negotiation, and public speaking skills.

Project-based learning is particularly effective in integrating soft skills into language education. It requires students to conduct research, analyze informa-

tion, organize tasks, and produce a tangible outcome. During this process, they must communicate within their team, distribute responsibilities, and resolve potential disagreements. *A group of engineering students prepares an English-language video presentation explaining the principles of renewable energy technologies, assigning roles such as researcher, scriptwriter, presenter, and editor.* This example illustrates how linguistic practice is combined with collaboration, creativity, and responsibility.

Debates and structured discussions represent another powerful tool for fostering soft skills. They encourage students to articulate arguments, support opinions with evidence, respond to counterarguments, and respect alternative viewpoints. *During a debate on the ethical implications of artificial intelligence, students defend opposing positions and engage in moderated discussion.* Such activities promote critical thinking, persuasive communication, and emotional control. Moreover, they enhance intercultural awareness when topics involve global or cross-cultural perspectives.

Role-playing and simulation exercises allow students to experience professional scenarios in a safe educational environment. By simulating workplace situations, language teachers can connect academic learning with real-life applications. *Students simulate a job interview in English, with one acting as the employer and another as the candidate.* This activity develops not only linguistic fluency but also self-presentation skills, confidence, and adaptability. Business simulations, negotiations, and problem-solving tasks can further enhance professional readiness.

The integration of soft skills also requires the use of reflective practices. Reflection enables students to analyze their own performance, identify strengths and weaknesses, and set personal development goals. After completing a group task, learners may write reflective reports discussing challenges encountered and strategies used to overcome them. *A student reflects on difficulties in coordinating with teammates and describes how active listening improved group cooperation.* Reflection strengthens metacognitive awareness and fosters lifelong learning habits.

Digital technologies expand opportunities for integrating soft skills into language teaching. Online collaboration platforms, virtual exchange programs, and blended learning models encourage digital literacy, autonomy, and cross-cultural communication. Students participating in international virtual projects must manage time zones, clarify misunderstandings, and demonstrate intercultural sensitivity. Such experiences significantly contribute to the formation of global competence.

Assessment remains one of the most challenging aspects of soft skills integration. Unlike grammar or vocabulary, soft skills are not easily measured through traditional tests. Therefore, alternative assessment tools such as rubrics, peer evaluation, self-assessment questionnaires, and portfolio-based assessment are necessary. Clear criteria should define observable indicators of communication effectiveness, teamwork contribution, critical reasoning, and creativity. Transparent evaluation procedures increase students' motivation and provide constructive feedback.

Teachers play a crucial role in implementing competence-based language instruction. They must possess methodological readiness to design interactive tasks, facilitate group dynamics, and assess complex learning outcomes. Professional development programs should support educators in adopting innovative approaches and understanding the theoretical foundations of soft skills integration. Without systematic teacher training, competence-based reforms risk remaining declarative rather than practical.

Institutional support is equally important. Curriculum design should explicitly include soft skills as learning outcomes, ensuring consistency across courses and academic programs. Collaboration between language departments and subject-specific faculties can enhance interdisciplinary integration. For example, language instructors may coordinate with engineering or business departments to create tasks reflecting authentic professional contexts.

Despite numerous advantages, challenges persist. Large class sizes, limited instructional time, and rigid curricula may hinder interactive methodologies. Some students may initially resist active participation due to previous educational experiences emphasizing passive learning. However, gradual introduction of collaborative tasks and clear explanation of their relevance to professional success can increase acceptance.

The integration of soft skills into language teaching at higher educational institutions represents not merely a methodological innovation but a strategic response to contemporary societal demands. By combining linguistic competence with transferable skills, universities prepare graduates capable of effective communication, independent decision-making, and constructive collaboration in diverse professional environments. The competence-based dimension ensures that language education becomes a dynamic platform for holistic personal and professional development.

The integration of soft skills into language teaching reflects the broader evolution of higher education toward competence-oriented models. Through communicative, project-based, and reflective methodologies, language courses can foster critical thinking, team-

work, leadership, adaptability, and emotional intelligence. Such an approach enhances students' employability and supports their lifelong learning trajectories. The systematic implementation of competence-based strategies, supported by appropriate assessment tools and teacher training, ensures that language education fulfills its potential as a key contributor to comprehensive professional formation in the modern world.

An important aspect of integrating soft skills into language teaching is the alignment of learning outcomes with national and international qualification frameworks. Contemporary educational standards increasingly emphasize learning outcomes that reflect not only disciplinary knowledge but also communication abilities, social responsibility, and the capacity for autonomous learning. Therefore, language syllabi should clearly articulate outcomes such as the ability to participate effectively in professional discussions, collaborate in multicultural teams, present research findings persuasively, and demonstrate intercultural sensitivity. When such outcomes are explicitly formulated, both teachers and students gain a clearer understanding of the broader purpose of language learning.

Intercultural communicative competence deserves particular attention within the competence-based dimension. In a globalized academic and professional environment, graduates must interact with partners from diverse cultural backgrounds. Language classes create a natural setting for exploring cultural norms, communication styles, and value systems. *Students analyze case studies describing misunderstandings in international business communication and propose strategies to resolve them.* Through such activities, learners develop empathy, tolerance, and the ability to interpret behavior within cultural contexts. Intercultural competence strengthens not only communication effectiveness but also ethical awareness and global citizenship.

Another significant component is the development of leadership skills through language instruction. Although leadership is often associated with management education, it can be cultivated in any academic discipline, including language studies. Group projects and presentations allow students to assume coordinating roles, delegate tasks, motivate peers, and manage time efficiently. *One student acts as a project coordinator who organizes online meetings, sets deadlines, and ensures equal participation of team members.* By rotating leadership roles, instructors provide equal opportunities for all students to practice initiative and responsibility.

Problem-based learning further enhances the integration of soft skills. Instead of receiving ready-made information, students are confronted with complex,

open-ended problems that require investigation and discussion. *Learners are asked to develop a communication strategy for a company entering a foreign market and to present potential risks and solutions.* This type of task stimulates analytical thinking, creativity, and collaborative planning. It also demonstrates the practical relevance of language proficiency in professional contexts.

The psychological climate of the classroom significantly influences the successful development of soft skills. A supportive and inclusive environment encourages students to express opinions without fear of criticism. Teachers should foster mutual respect, constructive feedback, and recognition of individual contributions. When learners feel psychologically safe, they are more willing to participate actively, experiment with language, and take intellectual risks. This atmosphere contributes to confidence building and emotional resilience.

Self-directed learning represents another dimension closely connected with soft skills integration. Autonomous learners are capable of setting goals, monitoring progress, and evaluating outcomes independently. Language teachers can encourage autonomy by assigning research tasks, providing choices of topics, and incorporating self-assessment tools. *Students select an article related to their professional field, prepare a summary, and reflect on new terminology acquired.* Such activities promote responsibility and intrinsic motivation.

The integration of soft skills also requires reconsidering feedback practices. Constructive feedback should address not only linguistic accuracy but also communication strategies, clarity of argumentation, teamwork contribution, and problem-solving approaches. Peer feedback sessions can be particularly effective, as they develop evaluative judgment and interpersonal sensitivity. Structured guidelines ensure that feedback remains objective and respectful.

Collaboration between higher educational institutions and employers can strengthen the practical orientation of language courses. Guest lectures, joint projects, and internship-based assignments provide authentic contexts for applying both language skills and soft competencies. *Students conduct interviews with professionals in their field and present findings in English, highlighting communication challenges faced in international cooperation.* Such real-world connections enhance motivation and demonstrate the tangible value of competence-based education.

From a research perspective, the systematic integration of soft skills into language teaching requires empirical validation. Quantitative and qualitative studies can explore the impact of interactive meth-

odologies on students' communicative confidence, critical reasoning, and teamwork efficiency. Surveys, interviews, classroom observations, and performance assessments contribute to evidence-based conclusions. Longitudinal research may reveal how competence-based language education influences graduates' career trajectories and professional adaptability.

Ethical considerations also play a role in competence-based language instruction. Respect for diversity, academic integrity, and responsible communication must be embedded within teaching practices. Discussions of ethical dilemmas in professional contexts allow students to reflect on values and social responsibility. *Learners debate the ethical implications of data privacy in digital communication and propose balanced solutions.* Through such engagement, language education becomes a platform for moral reasoning and civic awareness.

The integration of soft skills should not be perceived as an additional burden on already demanding curricula. Instead, it represents a holistic reorientation of pedagogical priorities. When communicative tasks are thoughtfully designed, linguistic and transferable competencies develop simultaneously. The key lies in intentional planning, clear objectives, and coherent assessment strategies. Incremental implementation allows institutions to adapt gradually without disrupting academic standards. In the long term, competence-based language education contributes to sustainable professional development. Graduates who possess strong communication abilities, critical thinking skills, and intercultural awareness are better equipped to navigate complex global challenges. They demonstrate flexibility in changing labor markets and readiness for continuous learning. By embedding soft skills into language teaching, higher educational institutions fulfill their social mission of preparing responsible, innovative, and competent professionals.

Thus, the continued exploration of methodological models, assessment instruments, and institutional frameworks remains essential. The integration of soft skills into language teaching is not a temporary trend but a strategic direction aligned with contemporary educational philosophy. Through systematic implementation, reflective practice, and collaborative effort, language education can become a central component of competence-based higher education, ensuring that graduates are not only proficient language users but also effective communicators, critical thinkers, and socially responsible members of the global community.

Conclusions. The integration of soft skills into language teaching at higher educational institutions represents a strategic and pedagogically justified response to the contemporary demands of the globalized and

knowledge-based society. The competence-based dimension of education requires a shift from the traditional knowledge-centered paradigm toward a holistic model that combines linguistic proficiency with the development of transferable competencies essential for professional and social success.

The study confirms that soft skills such as communication, critical thinking, collaboration, leadership, adaptability, emotional intelligence, and intercultural awareness can be systematically developed through communicative and activity-based methodologies. Project-based learning, problem-oriented tasks, debates, simulations, reflective practices, and digital collaboration tools create authentic learning environments in which language functions as a means of achieving meaningful professional objectives.

At the same time, effective integration of soft skills requires clear formulation of learning outcomes, appropriate assessment instruments, and methodological readiness of instructors. Alternative assessment strategies, including rubrics, peer evaluation, self-assessment, and portfolio-based approaches, enable educators to measure complex

competencies that extend beyond grammatical accuracy. Institutional support, interdisciplinary cooperation, and continuous professional development of teachers are essential conditions for sustainable implementation of the competence-based approach.

The research also highlights that the development of soft skills in language education strengthens students' employability, autonomy, and readiness for lifelong learning. Graduates who are able to communicate effectively, think critically, collaborate constructively, and adapt to changing professional contexts demonstrate higher levels of competitiveness and social responsibility.

In conclusion, the competence-based integration of soft skills into language teaching ensures the transformation of language courses into dynamic platforms for comprehensive personal and professional development. Further research may focus on empirical validation of specific pedagogical models, refinement of assessment criteria, and exploration of interdisciplinary strategies that enhance the synergy between linguistic and transferable competencies in higher education.

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