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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **An Investigation into Different Techniques for the Advancement of Soft Skills in EFL among Moroccan University Students**

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**| ABSTRACT**

Soft skills encompass a range of abilities, including social skills, communication, leadership, time management, negotiation, problem-solving, and critical thinking. Despite the growing emphasis on soft skills in discussions on general education and the qualifications of candidates for professional degrees in various knowledge areas, the implementation of these attributes in learning environments still needs improvement. As a result, the process has been bestowed with mystery, as if the development of soft skills was something outside the realm of academic activities. To ensure that soft skills are implemented, the former Moroccan Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research modified the LMD (Licence, Master, Doctorat) system (Miraoui, 2022). This paper examines this issue from two perspectives. The first is to explore the most effective techniques that contribute to the development of soft skills in the EFL context. The second is to examine the relationship between the student's level of soft skills and their academic performance. A questionnaire was administered to Moroccan university students to collect data. The questionnaire was adapted to fit the objectives of the current study. The first hypothesis posits that the adoption of focused strategies discovered in this investigation will yield note worthy effects on the enhancement of soft skills in learners. The second hypothesis states that the implementation of more effective techniques for soft skills development will correlate with enhanced academic performance and increased acquisition of skills among learners. Finally, This paper provides some recommendations for improving soft skills education practices in EFL contexts.

**| KEYWORDS**

Academic performance, Employability, Soft skills

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### **1. Introduction**

The development of soft skills represents a crucial aspect of higher education, particularly in disciplines such as language learning. Indeed, the enhancement of students' soft skills is a matter of significant concern in the majority of global educational systems, including those in Morocco.

The term "soft skills" encompasses non-technical, trans-situational abilities, including problem solving, communication, personal attributes, work ethic, and interpersonal and collaborative skills (Kantrowitz, 2005[10]). The development of soft skills is beneficial for higher education students in order to ensure that they meet the requirements and expectations of potential future employers (Hafazah, 2015[9]). These non-technical skills involve a range of abilities, those related to teamwork, communication, time management, flexibility, creativity, emotional intelligence, adaptability, and others (Andrews & Higson, 2008[2]). A number of techniques may be employed to teach soft skills while a variety of approaches may be utilized to evaluate their acquisition (Cinque & Kippels, 2023[6]).

In the context of Moroccan higher education, the necessity of providing students engaged in the study of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) with essential transferable skills, such as communication, teamwork, and critical thinking, has increased

considerably in recent times. The cultivation of these abilities is crucial for students' future success, both academically and professionally. They enhance technical expertise and are indispensable for navigating cross-cultural communication and integrating effectively within a global framework (Durga & Rao, 2018[7]).

With a view to guarantee that university graduates are equipped with the requisite soft skills for an array of future vocations, Moroccan higher education institutions must integrate such training into their course curricula. In order to enhance the quality of university education within Morocco, the Ministry of Moroccan Higher Education has initiated a series of reforms, which include the introduction of the Bachelor system in 2019 (Ministère de l'éducation Nationale, de l'enseignement Supérieur de la Formation des Cadres et de la Recherche Scientifique, 2019). Nevertheless, the former Moroccan minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Abdellatif Miraoui, has delayed the introduction of the Bachelor system. Furthermore, he has introduced substantial amendments to the existing LMD (license, Master, and Doctorate) system, integrating elements, such as practicum, mentoring, and service learning (Miraoui, 2022).

The growing demand for soft skills in the context of communication and business is a key factor driving the current interest in their development (Nealy, 2005[12]). In order to address this need, those engaged in the field of English language teaching have endeavored to identify and implement effective pedagogical strategies that facilitate the acquisition and enhancement of their students' soft skills. It is evident that those responsible for teaching foreign languages can play a significant role in ensuring that their students gain an understanding of the importance of soft skills development. Furthermore, they are able to streamline the methodology employed in both the teaching and assessment of skills in English. It is of paramount importance to employ the most suitable pedagogical strategies and techniques, thereby facilitating the active involvement of students in the learning process and enabling them to enhance their level of soft skills.

The development of proficiency in a language effectively cultivates the acquisition of linguistic abilities, as well as the enhancement of students' interpersonal and transferable skill sets, which are collectively referred to as 'soft' skills. Consequently, those engaged in the teaching of foreign languages are advised to design lessons which will enable their students to further develop their abilities in these areas. The initial stage of learning skill development can entail the cultivation of reflective and evaluative abilities, which facilitate the monitoring of students' progress (Paes & Eberhart, 2019[13]).

The rising emphasis on the significance of soft skills — communication, teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving — signifies their growing recognition as pivotal to enhancing employability and macroeconomic performance on a global scale, including Morocco. Despite the prevalence of policy discourses that position soft skills as an integral component of education, their implementation has been largely ad hoc and superficial (Bouzidi, 2018 [5]).

Studies by universities show that there is a lack of inclusion of soft skills in the curriculum. Moroccan universities have traditionally undervalued soft skills in higher education (Bouzidi, 2018 [5]). These skills are often considered secondary to academic pursuits, not as important as offerings that potentially have the greatest impact upon students' abilities and future success. On the field of vocational training, according to the results of (El Haddaoui, 2022 [8]), trainers are aware of the highest priority of soft skills. This is because they are under-prepared, have limited time and resources, and as a result are unable to adopt successful pedagogical strategies.

The extant research findings indicate a pervasive resistance to soft skills pedagogies at systemic levels of education practice. Ait Ouakoub observes that the majority of Moroccan teachers prioritize hard knowledge over soft skills and receive limited training in pedagogical methods that could facilitate the effective integration of soft skills in their practice (Ait Ouakoub, 2020 [1]) . Resistance to change in the curriculum and a copycat teaching style that emphasizes passive learning also make soft skills development quite complex (Benbrahim, 2021 [4]).

Moreover, they recognize the importance of soft skills but express dissatisfaction toward the current condition of formal teaching of these skills (Benjelloun, 2021 [3]). This gap between recognition and action highlights the importance of pedagogical cultures that are resistant at the local level.

One important criticism of the recent literature has been the idea that policy guidance is not enough. They need to heavily supported to work: teacher training, curriculum reform and cultural adaptation (Lahlou & Fassi-Fihri, 2023 [11]).

The findings indicate that certain macro-political factors prevent the full-blown (full-circle) inclusion of soft skills in Moroccan education, generating a substantial gap between soft skill policy talk and soft skill classroom walk.

In order to investigate deeply the impact of soft skills interventions in Morocco on culture, pedagogy, and highlight the impact of socio-economic factors, researchers need to focus on further research in the field.

This paper seeks to examine students' perceptions of soft skills within the context of higher education in Morocco with a particular focus on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. It aims to identify the most effective techniques and strategies for the development of soft skills. Additionally, this study seeks to ascertain the relationship between students' levels of soft skills and their academic performance. The present study focuses on three Moroccan institutions, namely, the Faculty of Languages, Letters, and Arts of Kenitra; the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences of Rabat; and École Supérieure de l'Éducation et de la Formation (ESEF) of Kenitra.

## **2. Methodology**

The methodology section is divided into four subsections. The first describes the characteristics of participants. The second outlines the instrument used to collect data. The third details the procedure followed to collect data. The final subsection outlines the data analysis procedure.

### **2.1 Participants**

The respondents were Moroccan university students affiliated with Mohamed 5 University, Ibn Tofail University, and ESEF, more particularly, the Faculty of Science in Rabat, the Faculty of Languages, Letters and Arts and the Higher School of Education and Training of Kenitra. A number of one hundred and twenty two students responded to our designed Google form questionnaire. They belong to different educational levels, namely bachelor, master, and doctorate students. Concerning their gender, 63,9% were males, while 36,1% were females. As for their age group, 85% of the participants were between 18 to 20 years, 8% of them were aged between 21 to 25 years old, and 4% of respondents were between 26 to 30 years, and only 3% of them were aged 36 and above.

### **2.2 Instrument**

In the present study, a structured questionnaire was used as an instrument for data collection to collect quantitative information from the respondents. The questionnaire consisted of Likert-scale items and contained closed-ended questions on attitudes and experiences, and recommendations related to soft skills. To ensure the validity and the relevance of the survey, several steps have been taken to design the questionnaire used in this study. First, the main focus was on the previous literature review that emphasized on the occurrence of soft skills in higher education and EFL learning contexts. Second, the researchers adopted instruments that had been previously validated for equivalent objectives and settings. These instruments had been incorporated into the academic study of universities in Morocco. Finally, the questionnaire was revised by a group of university experts from the faculty of Letters, Arts, and Languages of Kenitra who assessed its comprehensibility and relevance. The reason behind focusing on the quantitative instrument is to test hypotheses through analyzing statistics and examining correlations to reject or retain the stated hypotheses.

### **2.3 Data Collection Procedure**

Concerning the procedure of data collection, a Google form questionnaire was sent to three different institutions including my students at the Faculty of Science in Rabat, ESEF in Kenitra and Faculty of Languages, Letters, and Arts of Kenitra through their institutional emails or through the social media platform "WhatsApp" to share the questionnaire form. One hundred twenty two responses were received.

### **2.4 Data Analysis Procedure**

As far as the data analysis procedure is concerned, the aim of the current study is to identify the most effective techniques for teaching and learning soft skills within EFL contexts in Morocco across three diverse higher education institutions. Additionally, the present study endeavors to figure out whether a notable correlation exists between students' level of soft skills and their academic performance within the EFL classroom. In order to gain further insight into the matter at hand, a range of categories were selected for inclusion in the Google Form questionnaire. These include background information regarding the participants, details of their academic studies and soft skills participation, an assessment of the effectiveness of soft skills programs, an examination of the development of soft skills techniques within the EFL classroom, an analysis of academic performance and soft skills in the EFL classes, and finally, a set of recommendations for developing learners' soft skills. In the following section, the results of these investigations will be presented in detail.

## **3. Results**

The results section comprises six subsections, the first of which pertains to the participants' demographic background encompassing their age, gender, and level of education. The second subsection builds upon the preceding one by providing information regarding the field of study of the participants who participated in the study. The third section addresses the

perceived effectiveness of soft skills. This includes students' participation in soft skills development activities and an evaluation of the efficacy of such activities. Section four addresses the cultivation of soft skills within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes. It explores the techniques employed to develop soft skills, as well as the extent to which students are aware of the importance of soft skills in their studies. Concerning the fifth section, an investigation was conducted into the academic performance of soft skills in the context of EFL classes. The objective of this section is to ascertain the impact that soft skills development activities have on the academic performance of learners. In addition, it considers the correlation between the participants' proficiency level in soft skills and their academic achievements within EFL contexts. The last section presents recommendations for developing learners' soft skills within the context of EFL instruction.

**3.1. Participants' Background Information**

**a) Age**

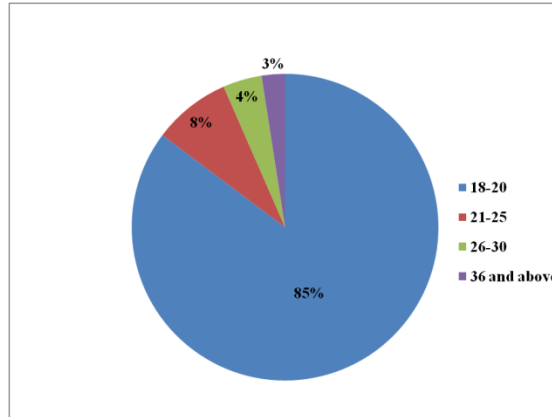


Figure 1: Age

As Figure 1 demonstrates, participants belong to four age groups: the majority of participants were between 18 to 20 years with a percentage of 85%; this is followed by 8% between 21 to 25, 4% between 26 to 30, and only 3% above 36 years.

**b) Gender**

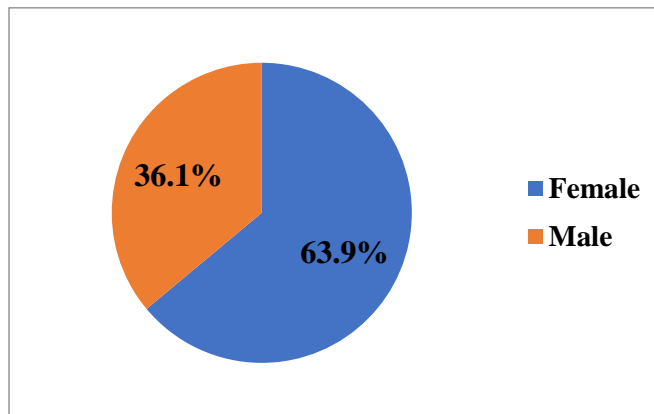


Figure 2: Gender Distribution

A comparison of the gender distribution of the survey population reveals a higher representation of females with 63.9% and 36.1% males. This gender distribution is consistent with more general patterns seen in educational environments. This phenomenon is especially noticeable in language and social science-related fields, where female participation frequently outpaces male participation. This disparity might indicate that the results will better reflect female perspectives.

**C) Educational Level**

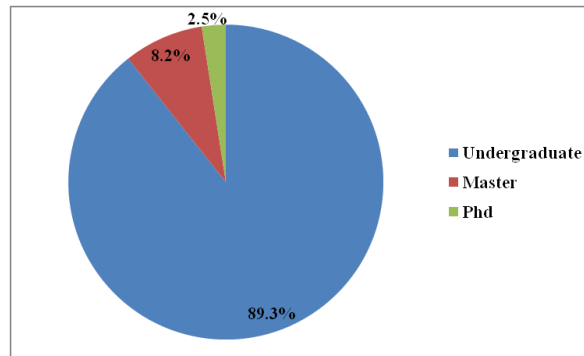


Figure 3: Educational Level

As illustrated in the above pie chart, the majority of participants are undergraduate students, representing 89.3% of the total. The remaining 8.2% are master students while only 2.5% doctoral students. The distribution of students by educational level can be explained by the overall composition of the student population.

**3.2. Academic Studies**

The academic studies section classifies participants according to their field of study. All the participants belong to public sector institutions, and most follow their studies at the faculty level, particularly the faculty of science, social sciences, and humanities.

**a) Field of Study**

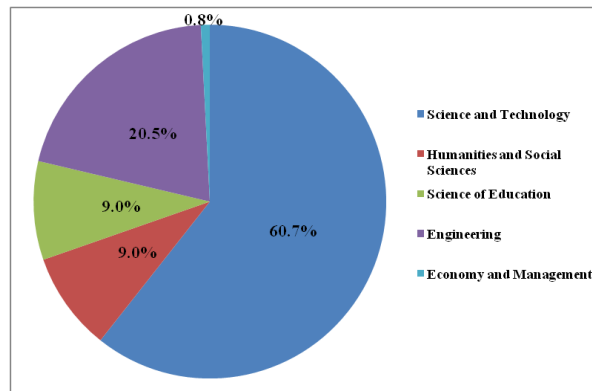


Figure 5: Field of Study

As far as the field of study is concerned, 60.7% of participants are enrolled in Science and Technology while 20.5% in the Engineering discipline, 9% in Science of Education and Humanities and Social Sciences, and in Economy and Management.

### 3.3 Perceived Effectiveness of Soft Skills

#### a) Soft skills participation

Have you personally participated in any soft skills development activities or workshops at the university?

122 réponses

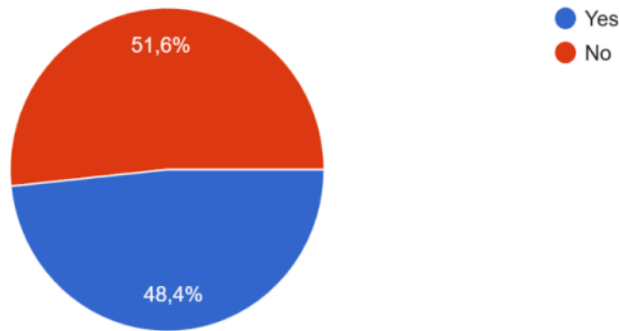


Figure 7: Participation in Soft Skills Programs

For the participation in soft skills programs, around half of the respondents claimed that they do not participate in any soft skills activities.

#### b) Effectiveness of soft skills programs

If yes, please rate the effectiveness of these activities or workshops in improving your soft skills development on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being not effective, 5 being very effective).

122 réponses

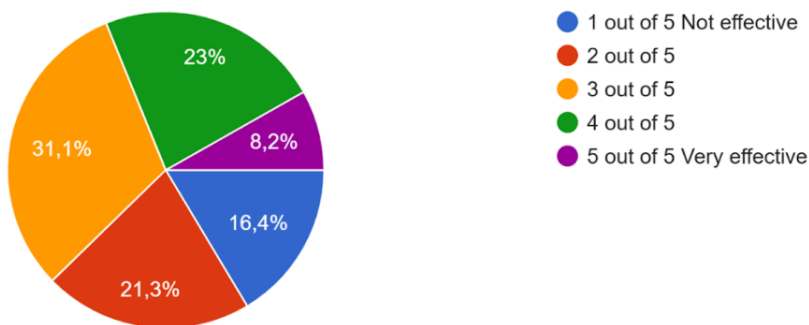


Figure 8: Perceived Effectiveness of Soft Skills Programs

As far as soft skills programs' effectiveness is concerned, 31.1% of respondents who had taken part in the soft skills programs rated them as average, 23% rated the effectiveness as above average, 21.3% rated the programs as below average, while 16.4% stated that the programs are not effective, and only 8.2% rated that the soft skills programs are very effective.

**3.4 Development of Soft Skills in the EFL Classroom**

**a. Awareness of Soft Skills**

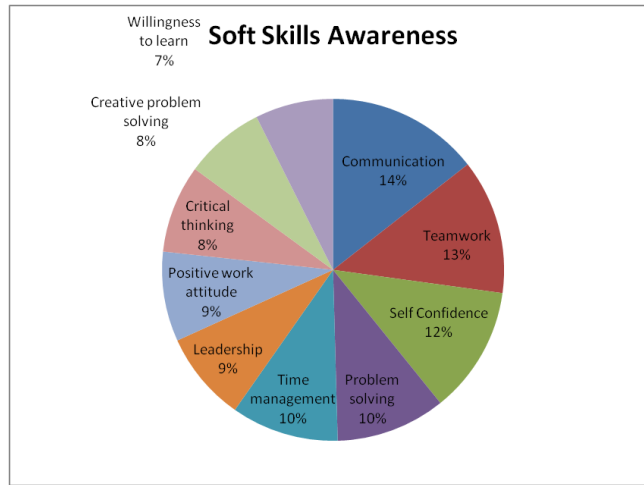


Figure 9: Learners' Awareness of Soft Skills

According to the figure above, the respondents arranged based on perceived importance and relevance as follows: 14% for communication skills, 13% for teamwork, and 10% for both problem solving and time management. Other soft skills seemed to be important as well to the respondents. For instance, leadership and positive work attitude skills received 9% each, 8% for both critical thinking and creative problem solving.

One of the respondents highlighted the need to integrate soft skills into academic curricula:

*"Integration with academic curriculum: Integrate soft skills development activities into the academic curriculum to ensure that students receive a well-rounded education that includes both technical knowledge and essential soft skills."*

**b. Soft Skills Development Techniques**

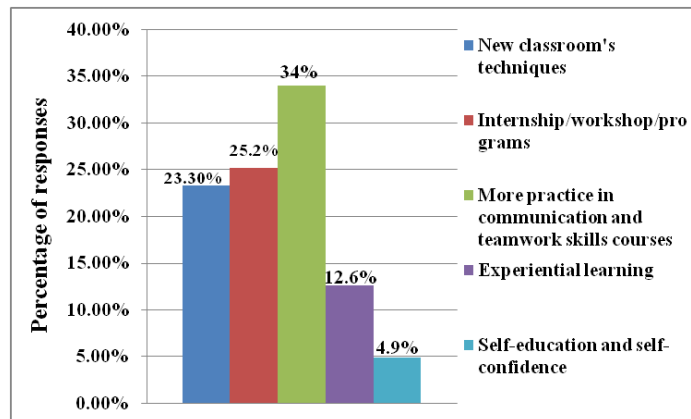


Figure 10: Soft Skills Development Techniques

According to the participants, the most desired techniques to develop soft skills are classified based on their respective relevance as: practical activities in communication and teamwork skills, internships and workshops, innovative classroom teaching techniques, experiential learning, and self-education. One of the participants stated that:

*"As universities often have diverse student populations, programs focusing on understanding and appreciating cultural differences can enhance students cross-cultural communication and collaboration skills."*

**3.5 Academic Performance and Soft Skills in the EFL Classes**  
**a. Soft Skills Activities and Academic Performance**

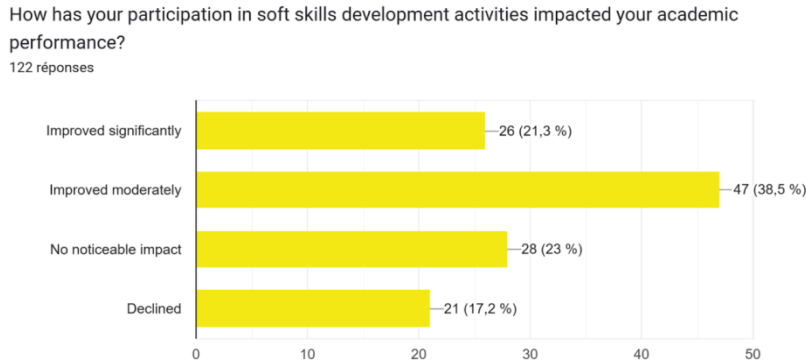


Figure 11: Soft Skills Impact on Academic Performance

According to the respondents' responses with regard to the perceived impact of soft skills programs in enhancing academic performance, 38.5% reported that their academic performance improved moderately, 21.3% improved significantly, and 23% claimed no noticeable impact. The remaining 17.2% surprisingly stated that soft skills programs have declined their academic performance instead of having improved it.

**b. Relationship between students' level of soft skills and academic performance**

	Value	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	17.852	<.001
N of Valid Cases	122	

Figure 12: Correlation between students' level of Soft Skills and Academic performance

To figure out whether there is a significant relationship between the academic performance variable and the global score of soft skills of the students, a correlation inferential statistic technique (chi-square) is used in the SPSS software for this purpose. The p value revealed in the chi-square test result above is (.001), and this value is less than (.05), which means that there is a significant, positive association between the academic performance of the students and their soft skills level.

**3.6 Recommendations for Developing Learners' Soft Skills**

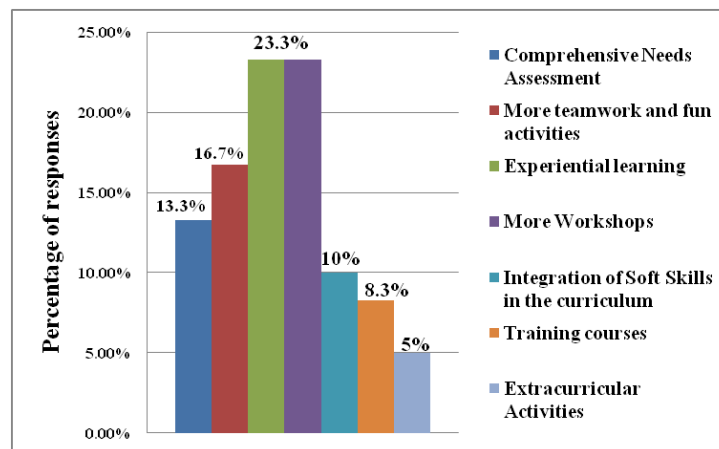


Figure 12: Techniques for developing Soft Skills

Respondents arranged suggested soft skills' development techniques according to perceived usefulness and effectiveness as follows: experiential learning, workshops, teamwork and fun activities, comprehensive needs assessment, integration of soft skills in the curriculum, training courses, and extracurricular activities. One of the respondents wrote:

*"From my perspective, experiential learning opportunities like internships, volunteering, or cooperative education programs are highly effective in enhancing soft skills among university students."*

#### 4. Discussion

The results achieved so far from the respondents can be categorized as follows: educational path, awareness of soft skills, effectiveness of soft skills, effective techniques of soft skills in English language teaching, level of soft skills of students, and academic achievement. In the subsequent sections, each category will be presented, accompanied by some recommendations for soft skills development in EFL classrooms.

As far as soft skills awareness is concerned, a considerable number of respondents think that the most crucial five soft skills are communication, teamwork, problem solving, and time management. Other soft skills are considered important to the respondents compared with the previous ones, for instance, leadership, positive work attitude, critical thinking, and willingness to learn surprisingly at the last position. According to Andrews & Higson (2008), the recognition by the participants that communication and teamwork are the most important soft skills is in line with the findings of previous research and Benjelloun (2021), who has identified these competencies as being at the core of employability and educational achievements. The survey respondents demonstrated an awareness of the significance of soft skills training and expressed a view that the integration of soft skills' programs into academic curricula should be a priority, on the grounds that this would have a beneficial effect on the educational experience. However, the participants demonstrated a lack of awareness regarding the importance of willingness to learn as a soft skill. This quality is regarded as a less significant factor according to them. It can be argued that willingness to learn represents the fundamental prerequisite for the effective acquisition of any desired soft skill.

If we have a look at the percentage of students engaged in soft skills programs, we can notice clearly that only a less than a half of students have participated in soft skills activities inside their institutions. This can be surprising since in recent years, the vision of Moroccan universities is typically focusing on integrating soft skills programs in the curriculum designed for learners. However, the reality seems to be quite different.

As far as soft skills programs effectiveness is concerned, the majority who had participated in the soft skills activities rated it as average and less, while only a minority rated soft skills programs as effective. It is similar to recent findings on the situation with soft skills programs in Morocco (Ait Ouakoub, 2020 [1]) indicating that such programs face problems when they are being implemented, and their effect, in the perception of learners, has medium efficacy; similar results were reported by El Haddaoui (2022). The results for the current study suggest that the quality of the soft skills' programs is not up to the students' expectations.

For soft skills' development techniques, the respondents have opted mainly for communication and teamwork courses, workshops, new classroom techniques, experiential learning and self-education. In English language teaching classes, respondents believe that the most effective techniques are innovative techniques that serve to improve their soft skills learning especially the communication and teamwork skills, workshops, and experiential learning.

Concerning the soft skills impact on students' academic performance, the majority of respondents claimed that their level of soft skills impacts moderately their academic performance, while a low percentage reported no noticeable impact on their academic achievement. The respondents believe that soft skills activities have a great impact on their academic achievement. Scientific studies have proven that students of universities in Morocco believe that the learning of communication, teamwork, and adaptability skills as being the main factors that have a positive impact on their academic success (Benjelloun, 2021 [3]). On the same note, Durga and Rao (2018) maintain that soft skills, especially the ones imparted through writing and communication training, have a major influence on students' academic success in EFL settings. In fact, the respondents prove this existing relationship and that the higher the level of soft skills acquired, the better the students' academic performance will be.

With regard to recommendations for developing learners' soft skills in EFL classrooms, the majority agreed on two main suggestions; experiential learning to enable students for more real-world engagement and plan more workshops. Other respondents suggest other propositions as assembling more teamwork and fun activities, carry out comprehensive needs assessment to figure out priorities to take into consideration in the future, integrating soft skills in the curriculum, arrange more training courses and organize more extracurricular activities.

#### 5. Conclusion

To wrap up, respondents deem that soft skills must be developed through using diverse techniques and integrating innovative soft skills activities into curricula to serve Moroccan university students academically and non-academically. Besides, participants

need to be conscious that without their own desire to learn, any type of soft skills cannot be acquired successfully. Additionally, respondents consider communication as the key soft skill in the EFL classroom. They assume that communication is the starting point to connect easier with multiple people from different cultures and backgrounds. They also considered communication as the most effective technique that needs to be improved through using experiential learning to contribute to the development of all types of soft skills effectively. Finally, participants believe that the higher the level of soft skills achieved, the better their academic performance is impacted.

Nevertheless, this research has certain limitations namely, the data being self-reported data, the narrow focus, and the absence of a longitudinal aspect. The sampling should be broadened to manifest a more diversified population of the study area for future research. The use of longitudinal studies also to verify the continuity of the effects appears to be a necessity for a thorough comprehension of the phenomena. The two (quantitative and qualitative) approaches are complementary and when combined lead to a much deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Besides, the exploration of avant-garde pedagogies, such as inquiry-based learning and technology-facilitated instruction, would not only unfold the effectiveness of the teaching method but also the emergent transferable skills that the students possess.

The consequence for the ground is that the education designers and practitioners should put an additional emphasis on the learner participation, the use of the approaches which place the learner at the center of learning, and the inclusion of communication and collaborative working skills in the taught content. In addition, the assurance of sustained support by the ruling authorities at the helm of the institution is imperative if the transformation of the development of soft skills beyond the confines of the strictly formal policy horizon and their integration in the academic and professional development of the students is to be brought about.

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