INTEGRATING SOFT SKILLS IN THE CURRICULUM OF ENGLISH STUDIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN MOROCCO: POSSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract:

The current research-based paper deals with a timely issue related to the new orientation of education to integrate soft skills in the curriculum of English studies in higher education in Morocco. The objective of this study is to show that it is important and possible to integrate both hard skills and soft skills into the curriculum of higher education. Related to this, the attitudes of a sample of students belonging to the Department of English Studies at the Faculty of Letters in Béni-Mellal were investigated to see their views towards the integration of the skills mentioned in the taxonomy of soft skills. The findings of the study revealed that the majority of the respondents have positive attitudes towards the integration of soft skills in the curriculum, ranging from communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, decision making and teamwork. Besides, the analysis of the modules programmed in the curriculum of English studies shows that it is possible to integrate such skills.

Keywords: curriculum of English, hard skills, soft skills

1. Introduction

The complex new era of globalization has witnessed a paradigm shift in the orientation of education worldwide. Morocco is not an exception. One aspect of this shift is seen in the movement towards including soft skills in the curricula together with hard skills in this digital age. Mastering technical skills is a must, but it is not sufficient for the qualification of the 21st-century learner. A transformation in modern education is taking place, then. Within this framework, some questions are worth asking. What are the attitudes of the students towards the integration of soft skills in the curriculum? Is it possible to integrate soft skills into the curriculum of English studies? Are there any

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challenges in this orientation? Should soft skills be integrated into the curriculum of English or should they be taught separately?

Entitled *Integrating Soft Skills in the Curriculum of English Studies in Higher Education in Morocco: Possibilities and Challenges,* the current research-based article is an attempt to show the transformation in education that is taking place in Morocco in higher education. The objective of this study is to show that it is important to foster awareness in the students towards having both technical skills and soft skills in the context of higher education, especially the necessity of integrating those substantial soft skills in the curriculum to serve the students and contribute to their self-efficacy and autonomy. Related to this, the attitudes of a sample of students from the Department of English Studies at the Faculty of Letters in Béni-Mellal were investigated to see their views vis-à-vis the integration of such skills.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 A view on soft skills and their place in the curriculum
Defining a universal definition of soft skills and their scope is challenging. The fact that various scholars list different soft skills and group them in various manners adds to the complexity of this issue. Still, we can list some simplified definitions and state that soft skills are non-technical skills that relate to how people behave efficiently. They include how people interact, think and solve problems, and manage different things (time, work, studies, etc.) efficiently (Engelberg, 2015, Cimatti, 2016). Soft skills focus on personal qualities and how individuals interact with others, while hard skills pertain to specific technical knowledge and abilities in a particular domain (Yunus *et al.*, 2005). Both types of skills are vital for education.

Soft skills differ from hard skills (technical skills, academic skills related to one's discipline). They are also referred to as 21st-centuryskills/life skills and global competencies that are substantial for capacity building and professional success. In the past two decades, educational researchers and practitioners alike have emphasized the importance of fostering a set of non-academic attributes, such as the ability to communicate and solve problems, often referred to as soft skills in higher education (Bennett, Dunne, & Carré, 1999; Stephenson & Yorke, 2013).

2.2 A taxonomy of the main key soft skills and their importance in education
The fundamental types of soft skills related to education are listed as follows:

A. Critical thinking
Critical thinking is important because it is a fundamental cognitive skill that promotes creativity through self-reflection and justification of perceptions and opinions. It improves language and presentation skills by knowing how to think clearly and systematically (University of the People, 2021). In the process of critical thinking, knowledge is not enough. People should be able to analyze data and real issues in a

manner that makes sense of their information (Wilson, 2017). This competency enables people to ask the right questions, leading to deeper understanding. Actually, critical thinking is one of the most important cognitive skills that one can develop through the practice of thoughtful thinking, and it contributes to making a positive change in an individual's life on both the professional and personal levels (Sutour, 2020 cited in Shamboul, 2022).

In the twentieth century, learning to think has become a fundamental objective of education (Dewey, 1939). The emphasis has shifted from transmitting information and content to the learners to enhancing their thinking skills. Education systems worldwide are shifting their focus to improving learners' higher mental processes comprising critical thinking and problem-solving (Ashraah *et al.*, 2012). Thinking critically requires analysis, which in turn calls for attention to detail. However, the details the critical thinker attends to are both relevant to the position and significant in its support. They are not side or trivial issues. The effective critical thinker is inevitably creative (Barry, 1984). After all, thinking is driven by questions, not by answers. Students should be trained in thought-stimulating types of questions to be active and constructive learners. This is congruent with the art of Socratic questioning, which is important for the critical thinker because the art of questioning is important to the excellence of thought (Shamboul, 2022). What the word "Socratic" adds is systematic, depth and a keen interest in assessing the truth or plausibility of things (Elder & Paul, 1998). The goal of critical thinking is to establish a disciplined level of thinking to our thinking, a powerful inner voice of reason, to monitor, assess and reconstitute our thinking, feelings and actions. Socratic discussion cultivates that inner voice by providing a public model for it (Elder & Paul, 1998).

B. Problem-solving using analytical skills

This skill is a crucial aspect of soft skills. It is a process that involves logical thinking and creativity to solve problems effectively and efficiently. It is also about understanding problems not just about finding the right answers. Problem-solving skills are important in all areas of life, and they must be in modern educational curricula. Using analytical thinking skills, learners need to identify problems even complex ones, and must figure out possible solutions. Often, these solutions are achieved with input from new information. Besides, active learning is related to problem-solving. Once solutions have been identified and evaluated, they must be implemented to improve learning outcomes and performance. It should be added that complex problem-solving requires high-order thinking skills involving analyzing, evaluating problems, and applying various knowledge and skills (Doleck, 2017; Peter, 2012).

C. Decision making

This skill goes along with problem-solving abilities. In order to solve problems, learners must be able to make decisions. High decision-making ability is expected to be present in any successful leader. According to Hallo (2020), decision-making is a skill that involves generating alternatives and selecting one of those alternatives in order to

prepare a suitable action. It is a cognitive process which results in a choice. Such processes can be rational or less rational and may be driven by explicit knowledge, implicit knowledge or by one's own belief systems.

D. Efficient communication

Effective communication is one of the keys to success. When we get our message across successfully, we convey our thoughts and ideas effectively. Communication is a two–way process. It involves being a good listener and interacting accordingly. Listening is, therefore an essential skill too. Listening is more than just hearing what is being said. Effective listening encourages others to listen to us and respond to what we say. Language learners should also be able to express themselves and communicate their ideas clearly and effectively. There is a need to develop verbal communication skills, including sound interaction with other people, presentation, conversation and public speaking abilities. Besides, there is also a need to develop written communication, which includes many aspects such as writing letters, writing emails, writing essays, writing reports and projects, etc.

E. Leadership skill

This type of skill plays an important role in motivating and inspiring teams. Successful candidates for leadership have strong soft skills, enabling them to operate with others effectively and collaboratively. In itself, leadership entails other skills such as creativity, persuasion, collaboration, adaptability and management with all its aspects. Besides, being an effective leader calls for communication and problem-solving skills and interpersonal skills that make it easy to foster good relationships with other people.

There are other soft skills which are important in the field of education such as teamwork, interpersonal skills, public speaking, intercultural competence, positive attitudes, life-long learning and self-efficacy. These are also closely related to the ones mentioned in this section, and sometimes they are involved in them. A sound orientation in modern education tries its best to optimize the integration of such types of soft skills to serve 21st century learners.

2.3. Why do soft skills matter for the students?

Educators have always emphasized the role of academic ability in achieving success, but this orientation was challenged because it is not sufficient nowadays. Workplaces and the job markets are calling for more than book smarts. In addition to technical skills, candidates are required to have soft skills which complement hard skills. As recently articulated by Grant (2021) in his treatise "Think Again", the role of higher education in society is to create curiosity, promote discovery, foster debate, encourage critical thinking and develop the next generation into more sophisticated learners (cited in Lynn, 2023).

There is a worry that university graduates very often lack basic communication and soft skills and, as a result, they are not ready for employment. According to Bremner and Furnham (2010, p.221), it is important to include "*…a set of non-academic attributes,*

such as the ability to cooperate, communicate and solve problems, often referred to as generic or soft skills in higher education". From this, the importance of soft skills emerges and for the following reasons:

- Soft skills guarantee employability: Technical skills may get candidates noticed, but their soft skills will ultimately determine whether they get the job or not.
- Soft skills Predict Success: There is always a correlation between soft skills and success.
- Soft skills allow hard skills to shine: Even with an impressive array of technical skills which may qualify candidates, soft skills have the added value of enabling these candidates to succeed.

2.4 A view on hard (technical) skills in language studies

It is generally agreed that every domain of life needs some knowledge and expertise to perform some related tasks and actions. Such knowledge is referred to as technical skills. These skills are used interchangeably with hard skills, which refer to specific abilities, capabilities, and skill sets that an individual can possess and demonstrate in a measured way. Hard skills are learnable skills that enable individuals to perform job-specific tasks, or that may be required for a specific job. They are learnt through training and education and are a requisite for performing job duties (Jeremy, 2023). Examples of technical skills include deep knowledge related to different aspects of pure and human sciences, art, technology, common operating systems, data analysis, business and management. In the field of languages, which concerns us in this study, hard skills include immersion in knowing languages and their skills related to reading, speaking, writing, listening and translation, together with a thorough knowledge of language sciences and language components ranging from vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Presentation of the technical aspect of the curriculum of English studies in higher education in Morocco

A close analysis of the curriculum of English in higher education in Morocco in its new form (2023), ranging from semester 1 to semester 6 reveals that the majority of the modules fall under the part of technical skills. Their main objectives are to boost students' knowledge of grammar, speaking, writing, reading, phonetics, phonology, linguistics and related fields such as sociolinguistics, pragmatics, applied linguistics, discourse analysis, reading novels and other aspects of literature, translation and cultural studies. The following table (Table 1) illustrates all these modules, taking into consideration the various semesters and 'parcours'.

Table 1: The modules scheduled for English studies

Semesters	Modules
Semester 1	- Grammar 1 - Paragraph writing - Reading comprehension and précis - Spoken English - Guided reading - 'Langues étrangères' - 'Méthodologie de travail universitaire'
Semester 2	- Grammar 2 - Composition - Reading Comprehension & Precis2 - Oral Communication - Guided Reading 2 - 'Langues' - 'Culture Digitale'
Semester 3	- Advanced Grammar - Advanced Composition - Extensive Reading - Public Speaking - Readings in Global Cultures - 'Langues Etrangères' - Culture and Arts Skills
Semester 4	- Introduction to Linguistics - Introduction to Research - Introduction to Discourse Analysis - Introduction to Translation - Introduction to Cultural Studies - 'Langues' - Soft Skills
Semester 5 (Parcours1)	- Media studies - Drama - Travel literature - Translation - Novel I - 'Langues Etrangères' - Digital Skills
Semester 5 (Parcours2)	- Phonetics and Phonology - Morpho-syntax I - Media studies - Applied Linguistics - Sociolinguistics - 'Langues Etrangères' - Digital Skills
Semester 6 (Parcours1)	- Literary Criticism - Theatre - Cultural theory - English Teaching Methods - Novel II - 'Langues'

	- Power skills
Semester 6 (Parcours2)	- Translation
	- Morpho-syntax II
	- Novel
	- Teaching Methods and Educational Psychology
	- Semantics and Pragmatics
	- 'Langues'
	- Power Skills

It can be clearly deduced from this detailed presentation of the distribution of the modules related to English studies (Tronc Commun National, Parcours 1 and Parcours 2) at the Faculty of Letters in Beni-Mellal, Morocco - as a case study- that there is more focus on the development of the technical side or challenging skills. From this situation emerges the need to explore the place of soft skills in the curriculum and to see the possibility of striking a balance between soft skills and hard skills by integrating the development of soft skills in some modules. The main objectives of this study, the research questions, were formulated as follows.

3.2 Research questions
Three research questions were put forward to give an orientation to our study. They were formulated as follows:

Question 1: What are students' attitudes towards integrating soft skills into the curriculum?

Question 2: Is integrating soft skills in the curriculum with technical skills important?

Question 3: How can soft skills be integrated into the curriculum?

3.3 Research tool
To collect data related to the issue of our investigation, the research tool that we used was a questionnaire. It was administered to a target population of 150 students from the Department of English Studies at the Faculty of Letters in Béni-Mellal enrolled in Semester 3. Students of semester 3 were in a good position to provide the data we needed in this study because they were already familiar with some modules belonging to the technical side of the curriculum in its new form. The questionnaire included some open-ended and close-ended questions linked to the research questions.

4. Presentation and discussion of the results of the study

4.1 Students' attitudes towards the integration of soft skills in the curriculum
One objective of this study is to examine the attitudes of students to the integration of soft skills in the curriculum along with hard skills. This is related to the first question of this study. For this reason, some questions were included in the questionnaire that we administered to the target population of this study. The study revealed that the attitudes

of most respondents towards integrating soft skills in some modules to which they were exposed were positive. Table 2 shows the attitudes of these respondents to integrating some fundamental types of soft skills related to education mentioned in the literature review above.

Table 2: The attitudes of the respondents to the integration of some types of soft skills

| Types of soft skills	Number of respondents	To be integrated in the curriculum (%)	Not to be integrated in the curriculum (%)
Critical thinking	150	100%	0 %
Problem-solving	150	93 %	7 %
Decision making	150	85%	15 %
Efficient communication	150	100 %	100 %
Interpersonal skills	150	60 %	40 %
Public speaking	150	100 %	00 %
Leadership skill	150	72 %	28 %
Teamwork	150	70 %	30 %
Lifelong learning	150	100 %	00 %
Self-efficacy	150	100 %	00 %
Intercultural competence	150	100 %	00 %
Interview skills	150	100 %	00 %
Positive attitudes	150	100 %	00 %

Statistically speaking, it is noticed that all the participants (100%) are in favour of integrating some essential soft skills in the curriculum, such as critical thinking, efficient communication, public speaking, lifelong learning, intercultural competence, self-efficacy, interview skills and positive attitudes. The respondents stressed that such skills are necessary for them not only in their studies but also in their future aspirations related to some jobs where these skills are highly needed.

Of almost equal importance, we have other skills, such as problem-solving. 93% of the participants in this study are for integrating this skill into the curriculum. There is also decision-making, 85 % of the participants are in favour of its integration. As for other soft skills, such as interpersonal skills, teamwork and leadership skill they come last with 60 %, 70 % and 72 %, respectively. This is quite normal because it is not expected that all the participants prefer to work in teams and communicate with other people and have a tendency to be leaders, given that there are always different learning styles and multiple intelligences.

4.2 The importance of integrating soft skills in the curriculum jointly with technical skills

The second research question in this study centers around the importance of soft skills for students. Figure 1 clearly shows the types of soft skills which were highly valued by the students.
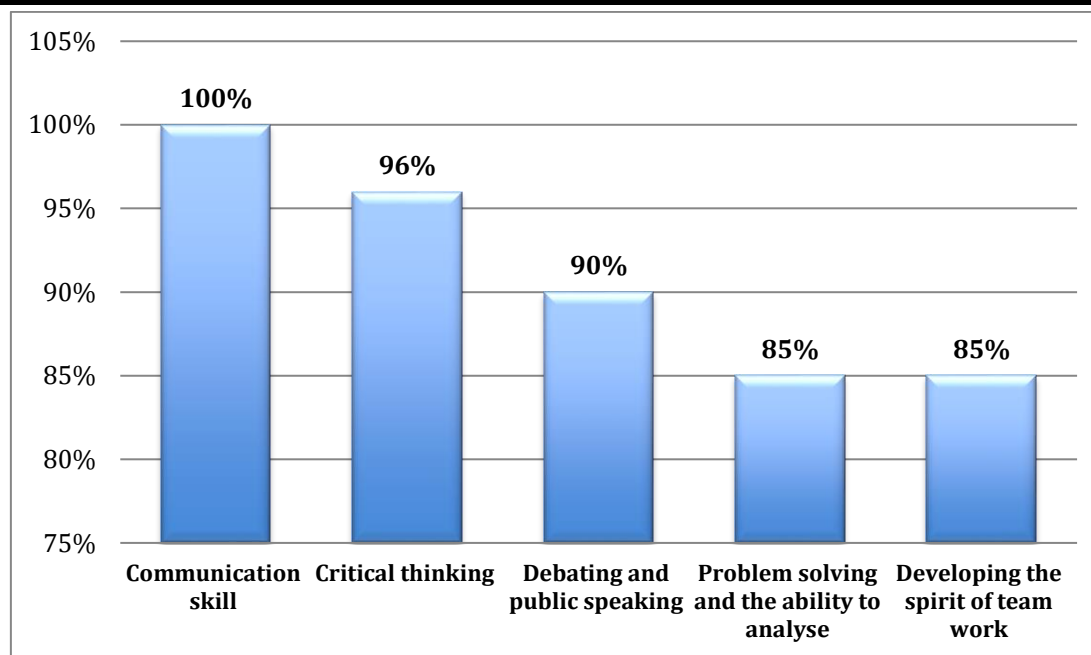
Figure 1: The importance of soft skills for the participants

These target soft skills were highly valued by the students, who emphasized their importance by giving arguments such as relating their studies to life and making learning meaningful. Almost all the participants stressed that communication skills and critical thinking are highly needed both during their studies and for their future when they get jobs. In addition, 90 % of the participants added that debating and public speaking are skills of great importance for the students. The respondents also admitted that the skills related to problem-solving and the ability to analyze and work together as a team are important for the students.

4.3 The possibility of integrating soft skills into the curriculum

The third research question in this study is about the possibility of integrating soft skills into the curriculum. An analysis of the various modules in the curriculum of English studies demonstrates that it is possible to integrate different types of soft skills together with technical skills. Table 3 shows this.

Table 3: The possibility of integrating soft skills in the curriculum

Module	Possibility of integrating soft skills	Target soft skill
Reading	Yes	Critical thinking/problem solving skills
Grammar	Yes	Logic and reasoning skills
Spoken English	Yes	Speaking and communication skills
Oral communication	Yes	Communication/presentation skills
Public speaking	Yes	Communication/critical thinking/negotiation/ persuasion/ leadership skills
Translation	Yes	Communication/problem solving skills
Writing and composition	Yes	Communication/critical thinking/ presentation skills
Linguistics	Yes	Logic/ reasoning and analysis skills
Readings in global cultures and cultural studies	Yes	Intercultural competence/ knowing the other and accepting difference
Novel + drama	Yes	Critical thinking/analysis skill/ communication
Pragmatics	Yes	Communication/interpersonal skills
Media studies	Yes	Managing information/ critical thinking skills
Advanced composition and introduction to research	Yes	Research skills/ managing information/ critical thinking
Phonology/morphology/syntax	Yes	Logic/ reasoning and analysis skills

According to the analysis of the various modules and the information included in the table above, there is the possibility of integrating soft skills in the modules scheduled for English studies. This is congruent with the view that soft skills should not be taught separately but rather should be contextualized and included in the courses. In the same vein Cimatti (2016, p. 125) stressed that "*Soft Skills teaching can effectively be integrated in each discipline using didactic tools to help students to develop them, such as project work, simulation, and case study*". For example, critical thinking can be integrated in the reading and writing modules and in the modules which have a relation with reading and writing such as the module of novel, drama and composition at different levels. Students have the opportunity to read and reflect on what they read. In writing, they also have the chance to think a lot before putting ideas into sentences and texts. In the modules of spoken English, oral communication, and public speaking, the target soft skills are communication, problem solving, and leadership. Exposing the students to different activities in these modules will contribute to developing the related target soft skills. Besides, there are modules related to translation, culture and cultural studies. The objective behind including these modules in the curriculum is to develop language competence, intercultural competence, knowing the other and accepting differences because there is always a strong link between language and culture. Another point to be added is related to the linguistics modules, such as phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax and pragmatics. They also contribute to developing soft skills, especially those related to logical reasoning and analysis skills.

5. Recommendations and future perspectives

There is always the possibility of integrating soft skills into the curriculum, even though such integration has some challenges. The apparent challenges are related to the infrastructure and the large size of classes in Moroccan universities. This makes it challenging to cater to all the students' needs and develop some soft skills. Besides, teacher training related to integrating soft skills into the curriculum is needed. Also, more motivation is needed on the part of students and teachers to go beyond surface learning and memorizing ready-made materials.

Hopefully, the new form of the Filiére of English Studies launched by the Ministry of Higher Education in 2023-2024 will include some orientations that boost the inclusion of soft skills in the curriculum. This is seen in some new modules that are mentioned in Table 1. Among these modules, we list:

- Module 6 in Semester 1, entitled 'Langue Etrangéres'. Its objective is to develop competence in communicating in foreign languages in addition to English.
- Module 7 in Semester 1, entitled 'Méthodologie de Travail Universitaire'. Its objectives are developing soft skills such as organization, searching for information, problem-solving and time management.
- Module 13 in Semester 2, entitled 'Langues Etrangères (Français / Espagnol). Its objectives are to develop linguistic and communicative competences in foreign languages in addition to English.
- Module 14 in Semester 2, entitled 'Digital Culture'. This seems to be a module related to technical skills, but its objectives are related to soft skills, especially things related to managing information and thinking critically about it.
- Module 20 in semester 3 which is entitled also 'Langues Etrangères'. This is a further continuity of Module 13.
- Module 21 in semester 3which is entitled 'Culture and Art Skills'. Its main objective is to develop intercultural competence.
- Module 27 in semester 4, which is entitled 'Languages'. Its objective is further to develop students' competence in communication in different languages.
- Module 28 in semester 4, entitled 'Soft Skills' itself. This module directly targets developing soft skills such as critical thinking, teamwork and problem-solving.
- Module 34 in semester 5, entitled 'Langues Etrangères'. The objectives of this module are to further expose the students to communication in foreign languages, especially French and Spanish.
- Module 35 in semester 5, entitled 'Digital Skills'. This is a module whose objective is to develop further 'Digital Culture'
- Module 41 in semester 6, which is entitled 'Langues'. This module's objective is to develop further communication in foreign languages.
- Module 42 in semester 6, which is entitled Power Skills. The objectives of this module are to develop knowledge related to human rights, civic education and socio-cultural competence.

Considering the aims of the new Filiére of English Studies, we can say that there is always room for striking a balance between soft skills and hard skills through double orientation. The first orientation is through integrating these soft skills in all the modules whenever possible. The second orientation is through exposing the students to new modules directly concerned with developing soft skills ranging from communication in different languages to intercultural communication, having digital culture, and research skills to treat the information that the students receive critically all the time.

6. Conclusion

Teachers are always agents of change. Their mission should not be to coach the students for exams but to teach lessons and develop skills that will be useful for them. They should also reflect on what they teach, stop spoon-feeding their students and make the courses make sense for the learners. In turn, students should be responsible and eager to gain knowledge and acquire valuable skills to achieve self-efficacy, autonomy, critical thinking, life-long learning and other fundamental soft skills specified in modern education to qualify them as 21st-century citizens.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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