



The Perspective of Students Towards Soft Skills in English Language Learning at Souphanouvong University

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to examine students' perspectives on the role of soft skills in English language learning at Souphanouvong University. A quantitative method was employed to achieve the objective. The primary research instrument utilized in this study was a structured questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale and encompassing four key soft skills: communication skills, collaboration skills, creative thinking skills, and critical thinking/problem-solving skills. The questionnaires included 43 items in total. They were distributed to the population of students enrolled in the General English Language Program at the Faculty of Languages, Souphanouvong University, for a total of 109 participants. The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 26) program to calculate percentages, mean values, and standard deviation.

The results showed that students perceived soft skills as highly important in English language learning. Among the four soft skills assessed, communication skills were ranked the highest, with mean = 4.19 and SD = 0.47. This was followed by creative thinking skills with mean = 3.96 and SD = 0.50, collaboration skills with mean = 3.95 and SD = 0.47, and critical thinking/problem-solving skills with mean = 3.83 and SD = 0.53. Based on these results, students' perspective toward soft skills in English language learning is important and considered helpful in their learning.

Keywords: *soft skills, English language learning, university students.*

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1. Introduction

1.1. Soft skills

The current globalized world is getting more dynamic, and soft skills have emerged as one of the most important components, allowing people to actively participate in all aspects of life. Furthermore, to thrive in both their personal and professional lives, today's students must be prepared to face unexpected problems that are difficult to imagine (Malykhin et al., 2024).

Besides the knowledge and skills directly related to a profession, soft skills are essential for future specialists in all areas. Currently, the world keeps changing at a rapid pace, and students need to be provided with skills and experiences that go beyond learning a foreign language. In an increasingly demanding and growingly challenging society, they need to be able to collaborate with people from all over the world, think creatively and solve problems, investigate sources more critically, communicate effectively, and have an optimistic attitude, according to Cambridge University (2020).

Soft skills are personal qualities that enable someone to interact well with other people; they include emotional intelligence, teamwork, and enthusiasm. They are essential for daily living and crucial for interpersonal communication and fostering positive relationships. A person's attitude, flexibility, communication skills,

teamwork, creativity, motivation, problem-solving, critical thinking, presentation talents, active listening, work ethic observation, emotional intelligence, and reflection are examples of soft skills. Soft skills, which can be developed via education and experience, are equally as vital as professional abilities (Doghonadze & Zoranyan, 2021).

Tang (2019) proposed embedding soft skills in higher education, as today society evaluates higher education institutions based on their response to social and economic needs. The research examined how Thai and British lecturers attending a workshop were transferring soft skills, as well as sharing their experiences of teaching and learning activities. The results indicated that the employment-related soft skills that graduates should possess include personal development, communication and interpersonal skills, teamwork skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills.

Currently, employees from all industries have more freedom in their work, and their work environment requires communication and talking, interacting with many people at different levels. To be able to communicate and interact with others effectively, Brungardt (2011) stated that four soft skills are necessary for all employees: teamwork skills, problem-solving skills, creative thinking skills, and communication skills.

1.2. Importance of English language learning and relationship to soft skills

English is now the primary language in many countries impacted by British imperialism, as well as in business and culture. It is a valuable and even crucial language to understand. English is widely studied as a second language globally. Many countries include English as a second language in their school curriculum, and students begin studying it at an early age. English is the language of science, aviation, computing, diplomacy, and tourism. Knowing English improves an individual's chances of landing a job in a multinational organization (Ilyosovna, 2020).

Salih (2020) investigated soft skills into EFL teacher education in Libyan universities, and in particular the views of EFL postgraduate students regarding their training and experience with various soft skills, such as communication, critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork, lifelong learning, information management, ethics and professional morals, and leadership. The findings revealed the lack of integration of most of these skills in the curriculum of the English departments in Libyan universities. Education authorities should be aware of the importance of teaching soft skills to EFL students at university to better prepare them for the workplace.

English is a significant tool for students in academic life; mastery of English is crucial during job-seeking, as a person often works in groups and must communicate fluently to succeed in their careers. At present, task-based learning can be a valuable option in the foreign language classroom, enabling the students to be active, interact with each other, learn by doing, and develop their language knowledge through communicative tasks (Rao, 2019b).

English language teaching and learning is the process of imparting knowledge, skills, and competencies to students. There are many problems faced by both teachers and students, such as teachers' use of traditional teaching methods, especially in the past, which may not have supported or integrated English language teaching and learning with soft skills in the class (Patel & Jain, 2008).

English language learning is one of the most important factors influencing international communication operations for proficiency and communication. Students use several aspects of English language abilities such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Radhika et al., 2017).

Based on the study of theories and previous research, it has been found that educational development guidelines, especially related to soft skills, play a role in the teaching and learning process. Andrievskikh & Lapina (2021) proposed the integration of soft skills development into English language classes. To achieve their objective, they employed a combination of methodologies in their research, including questionnaires, interviews, group

discussions, and observations. The results indicated that higher education institutions should prioritize developing soft skills as they are highly sought after by employers in today's job market. When teachers of foreign languages communicate skills development plans to students, it helps ensure active participants and effective skills development through relevant teaching techniques.

Based on all the information above, the researcher identified a strong interest in exploring the students' perspectives toward soft skills in English language learning at Souphanouvong University. Therefore, the primary objective of this study was to examine students' perceptions of the importance of soft skills in English language learning at the Faculty of Languages. The study specifically focused on students across academic years 1 to 4.

2. Materials and Methods

This study is part of a thesis examining the perspectives of both teachers and students on the role of soft skills in English language teaching and learning at Souphanouvong University.

2.1. The population

Lao PDR is one of the Asian countries where English has been taught as a foreign language in schools and institutions of education, specifically in higher education institutions (Souriyavongsa et al., 2013). Souphanouvong University, established in 2003, is a public university in Lao PDR. It comprises six faculties, including the Faculty of Languages, which specializes in teaching languages. It covers English teaching and course development to upgrade students' knowledge and help solve their study problems.

The population of this study is students who are studying in the General English language program at the Faculty of Languages, Souphanouvong University, during the academic year 2024 – 2025. The participants in this study are students in years 1 to 4. The whole population was selected to participate in the research. The total number of students is 112, but the researcher could only collect data from 109 students because a few were absent at the time of data collection.

2.2. The research instrument

Questionnaires were employed to collect the data for this study. The questionnaires were developed based on previous studies by Ihmeideh et al. (2010), Chopra & Kauts (2023), Mizal & Al-Noori (2020), and Noah & Aziz (2020). There were 43 items, focusing on four skills: communication skills, collaboration skills, creative thinking skills, and critical thinking/problem-solving skills. The questionnaires consisted of two main parts for collecting data: Part one about personal information, and Part two about soft skills related to English language learning. These included communication skills with 12 items, collaboration skills with 10 items, creative thinking skills with 11, and critical thinking/problem-solving skills

with 10. The data was calculated based on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree. The meaning of the average is as follows:

Mean range	Level of agreement
4.51 – 5.00	Strongly Agree
3.51 – 4.50	Agree
2.51 – 3.50	Neutral
1.51 – 2.50	Disagree
1.00 – 1.50	Strongly Disagree

To evaluate the quality of the research instrument, the researcher used content validity testing. The questionnaire was evaluated by three research experts to check the content coverage and related theories, as well as appropriate language and words, to determine the content validity and adjust it as appropriate for the sample group. The questionnaire was further tested by using the Index of Item Objective Congruence (IOC), according to Srisa-ard (2002).

+1: When sure that the question is consistent with the purpose.

0: When not sure whether the question is consistent with the purpose or not.

-1: When sure that the question is not consistent with the purpose.

Then, the experts' scores were used to find the consistency index for each question using the formula

$$IOC = \frac{\sum R}{N}$$

IOC represents the index of consistency between questions and behavioral characteristics

$\sum R$ represents the sum of opinion scores of all content experts

N represents the number of experts

The researcher wanted to select questions with an IOC value greater than 0.5, which is considered consistent or valid. In addition, the researcher used suggestions from the experts to improve the questionnaire to be more efficient. From the three experts checking the validity, it was found that all questions in the questionnaire had a value of 1.00, which is greater than 0.5. Therefore, the questions could be used in the research.

The questionnaires were written in English, then translated into Lao and checked by experts to ensure that they were clear to participants. The researcher piloted the questionnaires with 17 students who were learning English in the Faculty of Education at Souphanouvong University, and none of the questionnaire items required changes.

2.3. Data collection

First, the researcher wrote a request letter to the Dean of the Faculty of Languages to ask for permission to survey students at the Faculty of Languages. After receiving permission, the questionnaires were copied and

distributed to the participants to collect the data on different days during September 2024. The questionnaires were anonymous to encourage participants to be honest in their responses. It took about 30 minutes to finish the survey in each class. When the participants returned the questionnaires, the researcher coded the questionnaires and input the data.

2.4. Data analysis

The researcher analyzed the data based on the questionnaire items and employed descriptive statistics to analyze the data. The data were analyzed by using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 26 to find the percentage, mean, and standard deviation to see the main perspective of students.

3. Results

3.1 Personal information

The findings of this study indicate that among the participants, 53 students (48.6%) were male, while 56 students (51.4%) were female. In terms of age distribution, there were 37 students (33.9%) aged between 17 and 18, 49 students (45.0%) aged between 19 and 20 years old, and 23 students (21.1%) aged more than 21 years. Regarding academic year distribution, the largest proportion of participants, 37 students (33.9%), were first-year; 32 students (29.4%) were second-year; 20 students (18.3%) were third-year; and 20 students (18.4%) were fourth-year. Normally, students in year 1 have English classes for four and a half hours per week, while those in years 2 to 4 have classes for nineteen and a half hours per week. Concerning the number of hours spent studying English outside of class per week, 6 students (5.5%) reported studying for 1 to 2 hours, 36 students (33.0%) studied for 3 to 4 hours, 20 students (18.3%) studied for 5 to 6 hours, and 47 students (43.1%) studied for more than 6 hours per week.

3.2 Information about students' perspectives toward soft skills in English language learning

Table 1 shows the results for the 43 individual questionnaire items. Three items had responses with means in the strongly agree range, 39 items had responses with means in the agree range, and only one item had responses with a mean in the neutral range. The communication skills had two items with means in the strongly agree category: 'developing my communication skills is just as important as developing my knowledge' with a mean of 4.51, and 'learning communication skills is important because my ability to communicate is a lifelong skill' with a mean of 4.54. The critical thinking/problem-solving skills had only one item with a mean in the strongly agree category: 'The critical thinking and problem-solving skills I have developed will help me in my future career' with a mean of 4.52. All of the items in the collaboration skills and creative thinking skills had responses with means in the agree range. Only the critical thinking/problem-solving skills had a mean in the neutral range: 'I can identify problems' with a mean of 3.31. No items had responses

with a mean in the disagree or strongly disagree category ranges.

Table 2 shows the overall results of the study. Students perceived communication skills as the most important soft skill, with a mean = 4.19 and SD = 0.47. This was followed by creative thinking skills with a mean = 3.96 and SD = 0.50; collaboration skills with a mean = 3.95 and SD = 0.47; and critical thinking/problem-solving skills with a mean = 3.83 and SD = 0.53. Based on the study's findings, respondents demonstrated a positive attitude toward soft skills in English language learning. They highly value communication skills in English language learning, recognizing their importance for academic success, teamwork, and lifelong learning. The study further implies that students can develop their communication, collaboration, creative thinking, and critical thinking/problem-solving skills through the integration of soft skills in the process of learning the English language.

4. Discussion

The results revealed that students at the Faculty of Languages have a positive attitude toward soft skills, and they highly value communication skills in English language learning, which had the highest ranking. These findings suggest that students' communication abilities may be improved through education and lifelong learning. The finding was similar to the research by Malykhin et al. (2024), which investigated students' perspectives of soft skills development in the English language classroom at Kyiv National University of Technologies and Design, Ukraine. The results found that the respondents believe that the activities that English language teachers usually use in their classrooms are aimed at developing both English language skills (oral and written communication skills). Soft skills that students identified as the most effective activities for development included games, self-selected activities on various topics, group projects, and role-plays. One of the students commented on the effectiveness of activities aimed at developing soft skills, including research activities, critical analysis, discussions and debates, role play, and self-analysis, which are crucial in the English language classroom. The student further stated that these activities develop analytical and creative thinking, communication skills, and encourage active participation in learning, and that role plays help students see themselves with new eyes and analyze information independently.

With respect to the results of soft skills in creative thinking, this study showed that students have a positive perception of creative thinking skills in English language learning, rating it second highest. Students generally recognize the importance of creative thinking and acknowledge its impact on their learning experiences. The findings are consistent with the research by Ghonsooly & Showqi (2012), who investigated the effects of foreign

language learning on creativity at Ferdowsi University of Mashhad in Iran. The findings revealed that learning English as a foreign language to an advanced level significantly enhances all four divergent thinking abilities, i.e., fluency, elaboration, originality, and flexibility, possibly due to specific cognitive practices and psychological consequences.

In addition, the findings are somewhat supported by the research of Sehic (2017), who investigated the effect of English language learning on creative thinking skills at a community college in the northeastern United States. The findings showed that the impact of English language learning on creative thinking skills in flexibility, originality, and elaboration showed higher mean scores in the post-test than the pre-test, although the mean scores in the domain of fluency did not increase. However, these results were not statistically significant, and further research over a longer period was recommended.

The findings in this study also showed that students perceive collaboration skills as an important part of English language learning. They revealed a generally positive attitude toward collaboration, rating these skills almost as highly as creative thinking, with students recognizing its importance in group tasks, cooperative learning, teamwork, and pair work. These findings are similar to the paper by Rao (2019a), which suggested collaborative learning in an English language learning environment. This paper provides insight into the role of the collaborative learning approach and how collaborative learning is particularly useful for learning English in modern classrooms, where learners share knowledge within short periods, such as in pair work, group work, cooperative learning, and collaborative learning. This approach helps learners acquire new knowledge and modify existing knowledge.

With respect to soft skills in critical thinking/problem-solving, the respondents in this study generally agreed with the importance of critical thinking/problem-solving skills in learning English. For example, 'I can come up with several ways to solve a problem,' had a mean of 3.80, and 'I analyze a problem by looking at it from different perspectives,' had a mean of 3.79. Therefore, they can also be creative, think of solutions, and find several approaches to an issue. The findings are similar to the research by Noah & Aziz (2020), which studied the development of soft skills among TESL graduates at a university in Malaysia. The results indicated that critical thinking and problem-solving are useful in learning as well as teaching English. For example, the same items 'I can come up with several ways to solve a problem,' was agreed or strongly agreed by 91.7 % (n=33), and 'I analyze a problem by looking at it from different perspectives' was agreed or strongly agreed by 86.2 % (n=31). Thus, critical thinking and problem-solving skills were important for graduates to develop while undergoing

their TESL program, not only for their own benefit, but to inculcate it in their students and lessons as well.

The overall results of this study found that the perspective of students toward soft skills in English language learning was important for developing their language skills. The findings are similar to the research by Kostikova et al. (2021), which investigated the soft skills development of university students in English lessons at Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University and National Pedagogical University in Ukraine. The findings showed that eight soft skills (critical thinking, creativity, team management, emotional intelligence, people interaction, conflict management, flexible consciousness, and stress resistance) are very important; these can be developed with university students through educational games in English classes.

Finally, the results of this study were similar to the research by Nurlaila & Fadhillah (2023), which investigated the soft skills training for English classes to develop students' quality at the State of Islamic Institute of Lhokseumawe, Indonesia. The results found that soft skills training significantly improved students' soft skills quality and improved learning outcomes compared to the students who did not join the soft skills training. Students who got the soft skills training reported higher levels of soft skills quality and achieved better test scores and completion rates. These findings suggest that soft skills training can be a valuable tool in promoting students' soft skills quality and could be applied continuously to improve university programs.

5. Conclusion

The study was carried out to investigate the students' perspectives toward soft skills in English language learning at the Faculty of Languages, Souphanouvong University. The findings highlight the significant role of soft skills in English language learning, with communication skills being perceived as the most important. The positive attitude of students toward soft skills suggests that integrating soft skills into language learning can enhance the students' overall proficiency. Furthermore, the emphasis on collaboration, creative thinking, and critical thinking/problem-solving skills underscores their value in fostering a well-rounded learning experience. These findings encourage the need for educators to incorporate soft skills into language education to better equip students for academic and professional success.

6. Conflict of Interest

I certify that all information contained in this research article is not a conflict of interest with any financial organization.

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Appendix

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of students' perspectives toward soft skills in communication, collaboration, creative thinking, and critical thinking/problem-solving

Questionnaire items	N	M	SD
Communication skills			
A lack of confidence is my major problem when communicating in English.	109	4.02	1.063
Developing my communication skills is just as important as developing my knowledge.	109	4.51	.675
Learning communication skills is interesting.	109	4.28	.771
Learning communication skills will help facilitate my teamwork skills.	109	4.27	.741
Learning communication skills has improved my ability to communicate with teachers.	109	4.41	.723
Learning communication skills is fun.	109	3.76	.971
Learning communication skills will help me respect my classmates.	109	3.88	.802
When applying for university, I thought it was a really good idea to learn communication skills.	109	4.28	.792
I need good communication skills to be a teacher.	109	3.55	1.050
I think it's really useful to learn communication skills in an education degree.	109	4.46	.674
Learning communication skills can be applied to learning English in education.	109	4.38	.717
Learning communication skills is important because my ability to communicate is a lifelong skill.	109	4.54	.714
Collaboration skills			
I share various educational resources related to group tasks with my peers.	109	3.94	.756
I always acknowledge others' points of view during group tasks, even if they disagree with mine.	109	3.83	.870
I elaborate my opinions to my peers in a group task.	109	4.00	.871
I express my thoughts & ideas clearly and directly in the group.	109	3.97	.928
I always give suggestions to my friends in group discussions.	109	3.98	.871
I actively listen to what the other group members are saying.	109	4.17	.877

I always respond by smiling or using soft eye contact while the other person is talking in the group.	109	3.83	.931
I trust and respect the group members while working in the group.	109	4.04	.827
I am emotionally attached to my group mates.	109	3.83	.792
I feel enthusiastic to participate in group tasks.	109	3.96	.860
Creative thinking skills			
I improved my ability to use different strategies to solve problems.	109	3.91	.764
I do not give up easily and learn to persevere when answers to issues/problems are not evident.	109	4.19	.855
I learn to listen and respect alternative viewpoints.	109	4.21	.668
I am able to evaluate the merits and demerits of new ideas.	109	3.67	.882
I improve my ability to use different thinking skills to generate new ideas/solutions.	109	3.90	.816
I like the challenge of thinking of new ideas.	109	3.94	.880
I am confident in problem-solving/decision-making.	109	3.63	1.077
I am more aware of things around me and ask more questions so as to understand something better.	109	4.16	.760
I learn to probe by asking more specific questions.	109	4.13	.708
The thinking skills that I learned have helped me in my academic learning.	109	3.71	.773
I apply the thinking skills learned in class to real-life situations.	109	4.17	.799
Critical thinking/problem-solving skills			
I try to think outside the box when I write my assignment.	109	3.81	.876
I figured out how to complete an assignment by relating it to previous tasks.	109	3.90	.769
I discuss ideas I have gained from class with my classmates outside of class.	109	3.88	.910
I answer questions using the knowledge I have gained from class.	109	3.92	.883
I can identify problems.	109	3.31	.930
I can come up with solutions to problems.	109	3.67	.903
I can be creative when solving problems.	109	3.72	.870
I can come up with several ways to solve a problem.	109	3.80	.803
I analyze a problem by looking at it from different perspectives.	109	3.79	.893
The critical thinking and problem-solving skills I have developed will help me in my future career.	109	4.52	.675

Note: N: number of participants, M: Mean, SD: Standard Deviation

Note: questionnaire items are adopted based on previous research by Ihmeideh et al. (2010), Chopra & Kauts (2023), Mizal & Al-Noori (2020), and Noah & Aziz (2020).

Table 2: Results of students' perspectives on four skills

Four skills	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
Communication skills	109	4.19	.473	1
Collaboration skills	109	3.95	.472	3
Creative thinking skills	109	3.96	.505	2
Critical thinking and problem-solving skills	109	3.83	.533	4

Note: N: number of participants, M: Mean, SD: Standard Deviation