



The Perspective of Teachers towards Soft skills in English Language Teaching and Learning at Souphanouvong University

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Abstract

In this research project, the researcher aimed to investigate the teachers' perspective on soft skills in English language teaching and learning at the Faculty of Languages, Souphanouvong University. A quantitative method was employed to achieve the objective. The instrument used for this study was a questionnaire on four skills: communication skills, collaboration skills, creative thinking skills, and critical thinking/problem-solving skills, using a 5-point Likert scale. The questionnaires included 43 items in total. They were distributed to the population of English language teachers in the faculty, a total of 27 participants, with 13 females and 14 males. The data was analyzed using the SPSS (version 26) program to calculate frequency, percentage, mean value, and standard deviation.

The results showed that from the teachers' perspective, communication skills were the most important with Mean = 4.50 and S.D = 0.39. This was followed by creative thinking skills with Mean = 4.27 and S.D = 0.43, collaboration skills with Mean = 4.22 and S.D = 0.45, and critical thinking/problem-solving skills with Mean = 4.21 and S.D = 0.53. These three were all close in terms of mean, and although still important, slightly less so than communication skills. Based on these results, teachers' attitudes toward soft skills in English language teaching and learning are crucial and useful to integrate into the classroom.

Keywords: *soft skills, English language teaching and learning, university lecturers*

1. Introduction

The world keeps changing at a rapid pace, and we need to provide students with skills and experiences that go beyond learning a foreign language. Besides the knowledge and skills directly related to the profession, soft skills are essential for future specialists in all areas. Soft skills refer to the ability to effectively communicate, participate as a team member, collaborate with people, think creatively and solve problems, and investigate sources more critically, according to Cambridge University (2020).

Soft skills are a collection of personal characteristics and interpersonal qualities that allow people to engage effectively with others. These abilities are frequently linked to emotional intelligence and are essential for success in both personal and professional contexts (Ghafoor & Ashraf, 2023).

Stephens (2013) defined soft skills as personal characteristics that support and enhance an individual's ability to complete a task. Soft skills are often associated with emotional intelligence, which is different from hard skills, which refer to a person's specific technical abilities in performing a

task. Soft skills can be applied to all occupations and industries.

Soft skills are useful in language teaching not just to develop relationships with students and better manage conflict situations, but also to increase the effectiveness of language teaching approaches. They are an essential skill set in education, regarded as a benefit for teachers and students, and they have received more attention from educational institutions and universities in recent years (Tang, 2019). Currently, soft skills have become increasingly popular in the literature about language teaching and learning (Salih, 2020).

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 4 soft skills are necessary for all employees as follows: teamwork skills, problem-solving skills, creative thinking skills, and communication skills.

The Malaysian Institute of Higher Learning interprets soft skills as "incorporating aspects of generic

skills which include non-academic skills such as communication, critical thinking and problem-solving, teamwork, life-long learning and information management, entrepreneurship, moral and professional ethics, and leadership” (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2006).

Regarding Lao PDR, it 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) English as a global language has played an important role in communication in the world. Also, English is necessary for science, technology, education, tourism, and business, and it is an important skill for students in the 21st century.

Souphanouvong University is one of the five public universities in Lao PDR, which was officially established in November 2003 to develop human resources in eight northern parts of Laos. The university consists of six faculties: the Faculty of Education, the Faculty of Economics and Tourism, the Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry, the Faculty of Engineering, the Faculty of Architecture, and the Faculty of Languages.

The Faculty of Languages was established under Minister Decree No. 1008/PM dated 16 July 2009. Presently, it is composed of five departments: the English language department, the Lao language and literature department, the Chinese language department, the Vietnamese language department, and the Korean language department. Of the six faculties, only the Faculty of Languages specializes in teaching languages. It covers English teaching and course development to upgrade its students' knowledge and help solve their study problems.

Souphanouvong University is located in Luang Prabang, a world heritage city. Many people come to visit this city every year and the number of tourists is increasing. So, English is an important language medium for promoting arts, culture, nature, heritage, and tourism and for providing technical services in Laos (Makesavanh, 2015).

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 a person's chances of landing a job in a multinational organization (Ilyosovna, 2020).

English is an international language in many countries and is a key to worldwide communication; it is used as a global language that has played an important role in communicating around the world. At present, English is

called an international language and it is also the second language of many countries. Therefore, many people can realize the importance of communication in this language. When they know English, they can visit and communicate with the citizens of most countries without any confusion in expressing their feelings and thinking. The English language has played an important role in communication (Bounthavong et al., 2023).

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

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 was interested in exploring the perspective of teachers on soft skills in English language teaching and learning at the Faculty of Languages, Souphanouvong University.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. The population

The population of this study is English teachers who are teaching in the Faculty of Languages at Souphanouvong University. The whole population, which consisted of 27 participants, including 13 females, was selected to participate in the research.

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 teaching and 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

The questionnaires were written in English. They were reviewed by three persons who are research experts to check the content coverage and related theories, as well as appropriate language and words to find the content validity and adjust it to be appropriate for the participants to be studied before testing. Then, the questionnaires were translated into Lao and were checked by experts who were knowledgeable in both English and Lao, as it was important to make sure the questions were clear for participants. Then, the researcher piloted the questionnaires with 15 other English teachers who are not teaching in the Faculty of Languages, and none of the questionnaire items required changes.

2.3. Data collection

The data collection was carried out as follows. First of all, the researcher wrote a request letter to the Dean of the Faculty of Languages to ask for permission to conduct the survey at the Faculty of Languages, Souphanouvong University. After receiving permission, the questionnaires were copied and distributed to the participants to collect the data in September 2024. The questionnaires were anonymous to encourage participants to be honest in their responses. The response rate for the questionnaires was 100 %. 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 research questions and employed descriptive statistics to analyze the data. The data were analyzed by using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 26 to find the percentage, mean, and standard deviation to see the main perspective of teachers.

3. Results

3.1 Personal information

The results of this research show that 14 teachers (51.9%) were males, and 13 (48.1%) were females. There were 2 teachers (6.14%) aged between 25 and 35 years, 12 teachers (44.4%) aged between 36 and 40 years, 10 teachers (37.0%) aged between 41 and 45 years, and 3 teachers (11.1%) aged more than 45 years. The results of the analysis of personal data classified by level of experience were more than 15 years, 13 teachers (48.1%); 10–15 years, 12 teachers (44.4%); and 5–10 years, 2

teachers (7.4%). The results of the analysis of personal data classified by educational level showed that most of the respondents had master's degrees, numbering 14 (51.9%). Other qualifications were bachelor's degrees, 10 (37.0%); diplomas, 2 (7.4%); and Ph.D. degrees, 1 (3.7%).

3.2 Information about teachers' perspectives toward soft skills in English language teaching and learning

Table 1 shows the results for the 43 individual questionnaire items. Eight items had responses with mean in the strongly agree range, and 35 items had responses with means in the agree range. No items had responses with means in the neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree range. The only two questionnaire items with means outside the even more limited range of agreement, 4.07–4.59, were the highest and lowest figures. These were the means of 4.89 for the Communication skills, 'Communication skills are essential for teaching and learning English effectively', and 3.93, for the Collaboration skills, 'Collaboration skills are an important aspect of teaching and learning English effectively'.

Overall, the results of four skills on the perspectives of teachers toward soft skills in teaching and learning English (see Table 2) found that communication skills were the most important with mean = 4.50 and S.D = 0.39. This was followed by creative thinking skills with Mean = 4.27 and S.D = 0.43, collaboration skills with Mean = 4.22 and S.D = 0.45, and critical thinking/problem-solving skills with Mean = 4.21 and S.D = 0.53. These three were all close in terms of mean, and although still important, slightly less so than communication skills. Based on the study's findings, the researcher concluded that respondents have a positive attitude toward soft skills in English language teaching and learning. Therefore, soft skills are increasingly important and useful in language teaching and learning.

4. Discussion

The results revealed that teachers at the Faculty of Languages have a positive attitude toward and believe that soft skills are important for English language teaching and learning at Souphanouvong University. Communication skills are the most valued, followed by creative thinking skills, collaboration skills, and critical thinking/problem-solving skills. The results are consistent with previous studies by Ghafoor & Ashraf (2023), who indicated the importance of soft skills for global competitiveness. Their research found that teachers push students to be creative, participate in groups, and develop the soft skills necessary for collaboration. Therefore, soft skills are crucial in teaching and learning English.

The high ranking of communication skills also aligns with research by Sabbah et al. (2020), which emphasizes the centrality of communication in language learning. Their results showed that there is a high level of communication skills among students. This suggested that effective communication skills are essential for fostering

student engagement and facilitating meaningful interactions in the classroom.

The results of this research are also similar to recent research by Boonmoh & Chanchay (2024) on the integration of soft skills in the language learning classroom at Rajamangala University of Technology in Thailand. The results showed that communication skills have a high level of integration overall and were given the highest priority as a key skill. In addition, the results were consistent with the research of Tang (2020), which indicated the significance of teachers acquiring soft skills in higher education institutions. Tang's findings indicated that the most crucial soft skills were, in order, communication, critical thinking and problem-solving, teamwork, and lifelong learning. These skills are all important for education.

Furthermore, the results were similar to the research of Salih (2020), who studied the integration of soft skills in EFL teachers' education at Sabratha University in Libya. The study found that the development of communication skills, critical thinking and problem-solving, teamwork, lifelong learning and information management, ethics and professional morals, and leadership has become crucial for EFL teachers in the 21st century.

Lastly, the results of this study are similar to research by Barseghyan (2022), who studied the integration of 4C skills (communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking) in Armenian EFL classrooms and their impact on students' attitudes toward language learning. The results showed that collaboration and communication were the main skills used in the classroom. After the intervention, students became more active, engaged, and confident in speaking English and their 4C skills also improved.

5. Conclusion

The study was carried out to investigate teachers' perspectives on soft skills in English language teaching and learning at the Faculty of Languages, Souphanouvong University. These results indicate that teachers have a positive attitude, and they believe that soft skills are important for English language teaching and learning. The high mean scores across all categories suggest that soft skills are increasingly recognized as essential components of effective language education. Teachers value communication, creative thinking, collaboration, and critical thinking/problem-solving as key skills that contribute to successful language education. These findings have important implications for teacher training and classroom practice. Emphasizing the integration of soft skills for both teachers and students can enhance the overall quality of English language teaching and learning and better prepare learners for real-world communication and problem-solving scenarios.

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 teachers' perspectives toward soft skills in communication, collaboration, creative thinking, and critical thinking/problem-solving

Questionnaires items	N	M	SD
Communication skills			
Communication skills are essential for teaching and learning English effectively.	27	4.89	.32
Developing communication skills is important to enhance my overall English proficiency.	27	4.56	.50
I can use my communication skills to engage in meaningful conversations in English.	27	4.56	.57
communication skills will help facilitate my team-working skills	27	4.59	.50
Teaching communication skills improves my ability to communicate with students.	27	4.48	.50
To be a good teacher, it is necessary to have good communication skills.	27	4.19	.78
Teaching communication skills helps me respect my colleagues.	27	4.33	.62
I effectively use group work and pair activities to enhance communication among students.	27	4.33	.67
Communication skills are useful in teaching and learning.	27	4.59	.50
I think it's really useful to learn communication skills at the University.	27	4.56	.50
I feel more prepared to use English in real-life situations as a result of improving my communication skills.	27	4.52	.58
Communication skills are important because the ability to communicate is a lifelong skill.	27	4.44	.57
Collaboration skills			
I encourage students to share various educational resources related to group tasks with peers.	27	4.30	.66
I always acknowledge other's points of view during group tasks, even if they disagree with mine.	27	4.19	.55

I encourage students to elaborate their opinions to my peers in a group task.	27	4.15	.60
I encourage students to express their thoughts & ideas clearly and directly in the group.	27	4.30	.60
I often give suggestions to students in group discussions.	27	4.11	.75
I encourage group work and collaborative tasks in class.	27	4.41	.69
I always respond by smiling or using soft eye contact while the other person is talking in the group.	27	4.30	.82
I encourage students to trust and respect the group members while working in the group.	27	4.41	.50
Collaboration skills are an important aspect of teaching and learning English effectively.	27	3.93	.82
I feel students are enthusiastic about participating in group tasks.	27	4.22	.69
Creative thinking skills			
I encourage students to improve their ability to use different strategies to solve problems.	27	4.48	.50
Creative thinking tasks help me think outside the box and approach English learning in a new way.	27	4.26	.65
I encourage students to learn to listen and respect alternate viewpoints.	27	4.26	.65
Applying creative thinking can evaluate the merits and demerits of new ideas.	27	4.11	.80
I improve my ability to use different thinking skills to generate new ideas and solutions.	27	4.26	.59
I like the challenge of thinking of new ideas.	27	4.33	.67
I am confident in problem-solving and decision-making.	27	4.30	.66
Creative thinking helps me find new ways to understand and use the English language.	27	4.15	.60
I encourage activities in class (role-playing, storytelling) that foster creative thinking.	27	4.15	.71
Creative thinking is an important skill for effective teaching and learning in English.	27	4.37	.62
I believe that creative thinking activities improve students' ability to use English in real-life situations.	27	4.33	.62
Critical thinking/problem-solving skills			
Problem-solving activities in English help me think outside the box and apply language in creative ways.	27	4.15	.77
I encourage activities that require critical thinking in class, such as debates and analyzing texts.	27	4.19	.55
I encourage students to discuss ideas they have gained from class with their classmates.	27	4.15	.86
Critical thinking/problem-solving skills are important for overcoming challenges in English language learning and teaching.	27	4.07	.78
I can identify problems.	27	4.19	.73
I can come up with solutions to problems.	27	4.07	.61
I can be creative when solving problems.	27	4.26	.76

I can come up with several ways to solve a problem.	27	4.11	.64
I analyze a problem by looking at it from different perspectives.	27	4.37	.62
Improving critical thinking and problem-solving skills will help me in my future career.	27	4.56	.64

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

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

Table 2 Results of teachers' perspectives on four skills

Four skills	N	M	SD	Rank
Communication skills	27	4.50	.39	1
Collaboration skills	27	4.22	.45	3
Creative thinking skills	27	4.27	.43	2
Critical thinking/problem-solving skills	27	4.21	.53	4

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