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CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEVELOPING SOFT SKILLS WITHIN THE EFL METHODOLOGY CLASSROOM

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This study investigates the efficacy of the activities employed for developing soft skills within the EFL Methodology classroom. Critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration known as 4C skills are in the focus of the research. Through a questionnaire administered to teachers, prevalent activities for soft skills development were identified. Subsequently, observations of EFL Methodology classes assessed the extent of 4C skills integration. Results reveal a diverse variety of activities favored by teachers. Observation data indicate strong development of communication and collaboration skills, while critical thinking and creativity exhibit room for growth. The study underscores the EFL Methodology course efficacy in providing conducive environment for soft skills development.

Keywords: soft skills; 4C skills; collaboration; communication; creativity; critical thinking; EFL Methodology; pre-service English teachers.

СТВОРЕННЯ СЕРЕДОВИЩА ДЛЯ РОЗВИТКУ М'ЯКИХ НАВИЧОК НА ЗАНЯТТЯХ З МЕТОДИКИ НАВЧАННЯ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ

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У статті досліджується ефективність вправ для розвитку «м'яких» навичок на заняттях з методики навчання англійської мови. У фокусі дослідження критичне мислення, креативність, комунікація та співпраця, відомі як навички 4C. Автор використовує такі методи дослідження як анкетування для визначення найбільш поширених видів діяльності для розвитку «м'яких» навичок та спостереження за заняттями з методики навчання англійської мови з метою визначення рівня розвитку навичок 4C. В анкетуванні брали участь викладачі англійської мови та методики навчання англійської мови. За допомогою анкетування визначено найпоширеніші види діяльності для розвитку «м'яких» навичок. Результати показують, що викладачі надають перевагу різноманітним видам діяльності, починаючи від вирішення проблем і закінчуючи рольовими іграми, дебатами та кооперативним навчанням. За допомогою спостережень за заняттями з методики навчання англійської мови в Уманському державному педагогічному університеті імені Павла Тичини було оцінено ступінь інтеграції навичок 4C. Дані спостережень засвідчують загалом позитивний результат з помітною перевагою в розвитку навичок комунікації та співпраці, тоді як критичне мислення і креативність потребують більшої активізації. Загалом дослідження підкреслює ефективність курсу «Методика навчання

англійської мови» у створенні сприятливого середовища для розвитку «м'яких» навичок. Ці висновки дають цінну інформацію для викладачів щодо ефективних видів діяльності для розвитку «м'яких» навичок, зокрема креативності, комунікації, співпраці та критичного мислення з метою підготовки здобувачів освіти до їх успішної професійної діяльності в майбутньому.

Ключові слова: м'які навички; навички 4С; співпраця; комунікація; креативність; критичне мислення; методика навчання англійської мови; майбутні учителі англійської мови.

These days, there is an increasing focus on enhancing soft skills in higher educational institutions as technical or hard skills alone are no longer enough in today's modern workplace. Employers are looking for candidates with strong communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills. According to Fallows & Steven (2000) and Washer (2007) soft skills may come to be determinant in future employability and professional performance [5]. On the other hand non-technical skills help individuals adapt and exhibit positive behaviours to effectively address challenges in their professional and daily lives. People who possess these skills are considered to be easy to work and spend time with (Mwita et al., 2023) [11]. That is why, to achieve success within the current and future environment, it is necessary for growing personality to access quality education and learning that develops skills, knowledge, attitudes and values and enables them to become successful lifelong learners who can find productive work, learn, and relearn, actively engage in their communities, make wise decisions (Boiko, 2021) [1].

Furthermore, Boiko (2021) states that “basic ideas and the significance of soft skills in assuring the long-term success of children and youth are emphasized by the national normative-legal acts such as the Law of Ukraine “On Out-of-School Education”, the Concept of “The New Ukrainian School: Conceptual principles of secondary school reform” , as well as international documents – USAID Education Policy “Social and Emotional Learning and Soft Skills”, the report of UNESCO “Skills for a connected world”, the report of UNICEF “The Global Framework on Transferable Skills”, Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4 "Education 2030"” [1, p. 23]. Therefore, the development of soft skills has become one of the key aspects in modern education.

Reviewing the literature on the research problem has led to a deeper comprehension of the concept of soft skills. Soft skills are generally interpersonal skills that help individuals to interact with others (Mwita et al., 2023) [11]. According to UNESCO IBE Glossary of Curriculum Terminology (2013) term “soft skills” is used to indicate a set of intangible personal qualities, traits, attributes, habits and attitudes that can be used in many different types of jobs [14, p. 53]. Furthermore, Glossary of Curriculum Terminology (2013) states that “examples of soft skills include: empathy, leadership, sense of responsibility, integrity, self-esteem, self-management, motivation, flexibility, sociability, time management, and making decisions” [14, p. 54].

Additionally, there are many variations on how soft skills are named: transferable skills, life skills, 21st century skills, or socio-emotional skills (UNICEF, 2019). As it is mentioned in the aforementioned document these “skills include problem solving, negotiation, managing emotions, empathy, and communication” [15, p. 1].

Developing soft skills among students in HEIs is very important to help them become

competent, employable and become successful in their careers (Mwita et al., 2023) [11]. The role of soft skills for future workers in the educational sector is very important (Tsymbaliuk et al., 2019) [13], as teachers play the role of mediator between generations. There is a high probability that teachers who do not have sufficiently developed soft skills themselves will not be able to develop or will treat this task completely carelessly during the education of their students (Braiiiko et al., 2022; Kniaz & Chukhno, 2021) [2; 8].

Despite the growing interest on the soft skills development, there is no common understanding about what skills are important, or how to teach or assess them (Caeiro-Rodríguez et al., 2021). Fadhil et al. (2021) mention that there are soft skills that may be given more priority by employers in one field and not be considered of top priority by another field [3; 4]. In this perspective, it's very important to identify the soft skills needed for future EFL teachers so that to create opportunities for their effective development within the EFL Methodology classroom.

The majority of scientists consider that soft skills that are important in the 21st century are critical thinking skills, communication, collaboration and creativity (Hunaidah et al., 2018; Jalinus et al., 2023; Kurniahtunnisa et al., 2023; Maisiri et al., 2019; Tang et al., 2020) [6; 7; 9; 10; 12]. In modern literature these skills are known as 4C skills. That is why, the development of the 4C skills can be viewed as the requirement of the 21st century. The application of 4C skills will provide great benefits for students in everyday life. Supporting these points of view, we focus our research on these four skills.

The study investigates the most relevant activities applied for developing 4C skills and opportunities for their development in the EFL Methodology classroom. The study examines the following research queries:

1. What activities do teachers use for developing 4C skills?
2. To what extent does the EFL Methodology course provide the opportunities for developing soft skills?

The research instrument used to answer the first research question was a questionnaire to identify the most widely used activities for developing soft skills. A group of 8 teachers of English and EFL Methodology of Pavlo Tychna Uman State Pedagogical University (Ukraine) was invited to participate in the action research. The results were analyzed in percentage and frequencies.

To meet the second research question we referred to EFL Methodology classroom observation in order to measure the level of 4C skills development.

The research started with the survey. The participants were provided with the list of activities applied for developing soft skills. They are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Teaching activities (Jalinus et al, 2023) [7, p. 72]

1. Active Reading	21. Focuses Imaging / Visualization	33. Peer Partner Learning
2. Anticipation Guide	Graphic Organizers	34. Picture Book and Illustrator Studies
3. Assigned Questions	22. Guided Reading	35. Problem Solving
4. Brainstorming	23. Heterogeneous Grouping	36. Read & Paraphrase
5. Case Studies	24. Homogeneous Grouping	37. Reflective Discussion
6. Categorizing	25. Interdisciplinary Approach	

7. Compare & Contrast	26. Jigsaw	38. Research Projects
8. Computer Assisted Instruction	27. Journal Writing	39. Response Journals
9. Concept Attainment	28. Learning Logs	40. Role Playing
10. Concept Formation	29. Mind Mapping	41. Scaffolding
11. Concept Maps / Webbing	30. Modelling (Demonstration)	42. Self-Monitoring Strategies
12. Cooperative Learning	31. Narratives	43. Think Aloud
13. Debate	32. Oratory / Public Speaking and Speech Writing	44. Think-Pair-Share
14. Didactic Questions		45. Three-Two-One (3-2-1)
15. Drill & Practice		46. Visual Imaging
16. Essays		47. Web Quest
17. Experiments		48. Webbing
18. Explicit Teaching		49. Writing to Inform
19. Field Trips		
20. KWL		

The respondents were asked to choose the activities they apply for developing each skill: critical thinking, communication, creativity and collaboration. Survey results on developing these skills are presented in the figures below. They include only those activities that got more than 50%.

Among the activities promoting the development of critical thinking there were selected the six widely used in the classroom. They include problem solving (89.2%), case studies (84.5%), categorizing (74.3%), compare & contrast (63%), think aloud (62.3%), response journals (55.6%). The findings are presented in *Figure 1*.

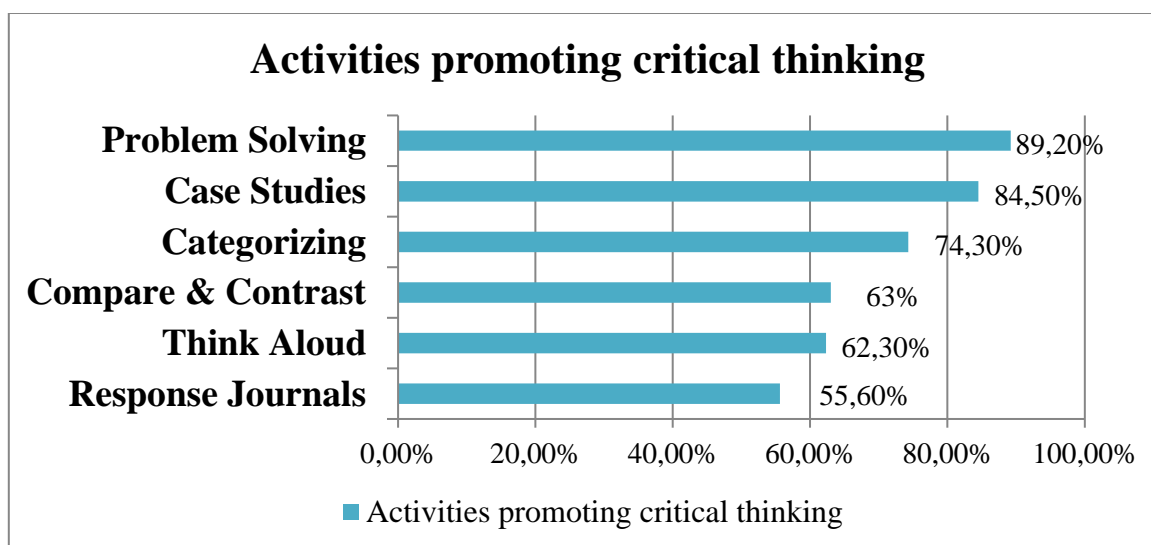


Figure 1. Activities promoting critical thinking

Activities supporting the development of creativity are demonstrated in Figure 2. As it is seen, seven were chosen with a percentage exceeding 50%. They are ranged in the following way: role playing (97%), research projects (89.3%), brainstorming (74.5%), essays (69.1%), mind mapping (59%), visual imaging (58.7%), and Web quest (52.3%).

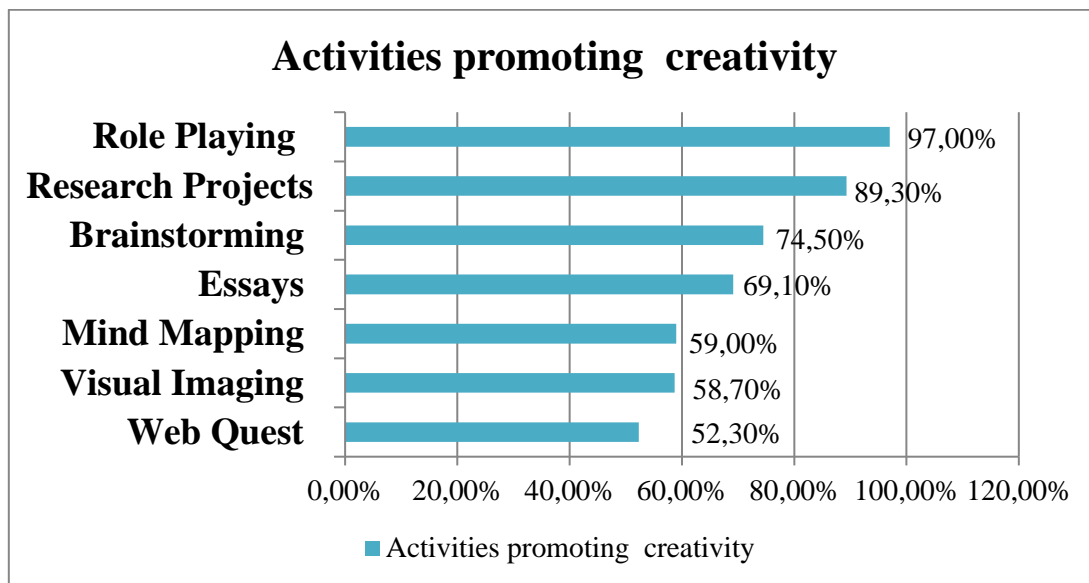


Figure 2. Activities promoting creativity

Among the activities focusing on the communication skills development the participants chose the five activities applied in the classroom: debate (87.6%), oratory/public speaking and speech writing (84.6%), reflective discussion (80.7%), narratives (64%), field trips (51%). Figure 3 illustrates the research findings.

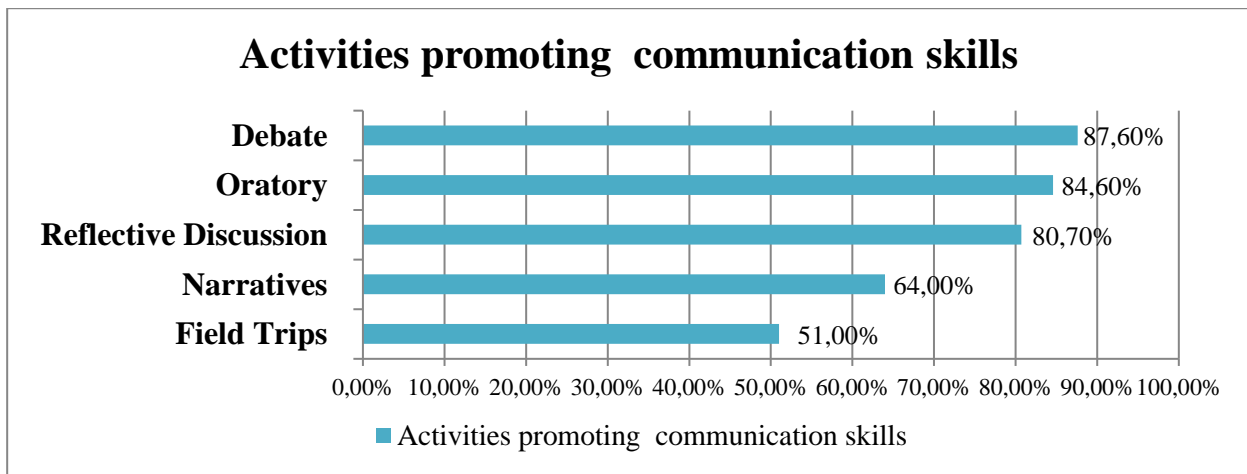


Figure 3. Activities promoting communication skills

As for the activities which promote collaboration, the participants named the following: cooperative learning (90.2%), think-pair-share (87.6%), research projects (78.7%), concept maps / webbing (75%), and jigsaw (51.2%). Figure 4 provides the overview of the activities selected.

These findings indicate the preferences of participants in selecting activities for promoting critical thinking, creativity, communication skills, and collaboration in the

classroom.

To assess the adequacy of training for developing soft skills in prospective English teachers, we referred to the EFL Methodology classes' observation. The data obtained helped to define if the EFL Methodology course provides opportunities for developing soft skills.

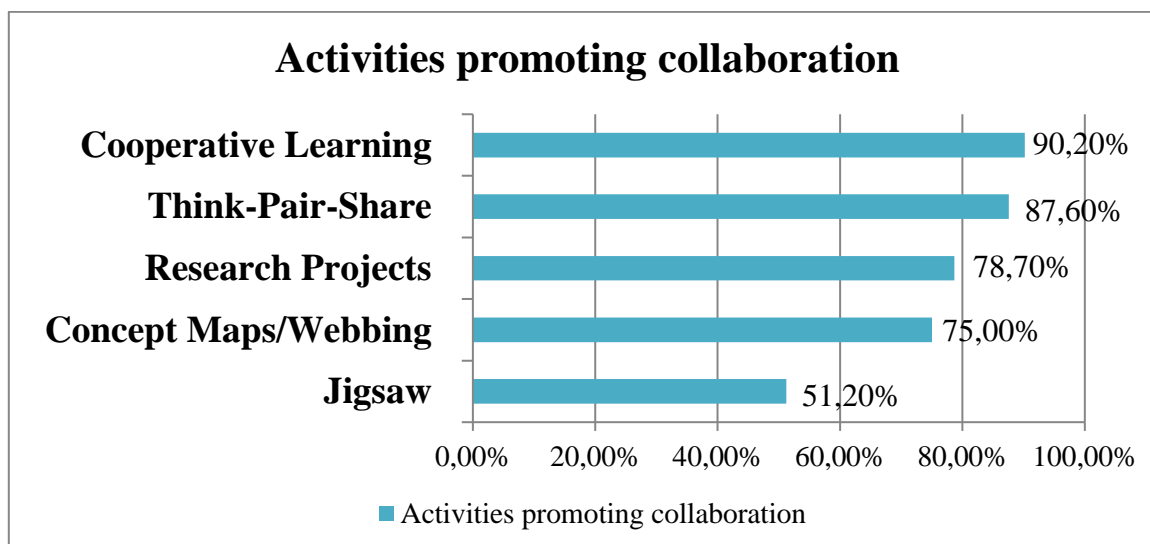


Figure 4. Activities promoting collaboration

This study was carried out at Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University from March 11 to 15, 2024. During this period we observed EFL Methodology classes in order to assess the opportunities created for the development of 4C skills in the pre-service teachers. The total population was 79, among them 37 second-year students and 42 third-year students. The Sample was 32 students (a group of students in their second year and a group of students in their third year), and it was taken randomly. When observing EFL Methodology classes the following set of criteria to evaluate each of the 4C skills was employed.

Communication skills:

- ability to express ideas clearly and effectively;
- use of appropriate language register and tone;
- engagement in meaningful interactions with students.

Collaboration skills:

- willingness to cooperate with others;
- active participation in group discussions and activities;
- supportiveness and encouragement of peers.

Critical thinking skills:

- encouragement of higher order thinking skills through questioning techniques;
- promotion of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of information;
- opportunities for students to express opinions and justify their reasoning.

Creativity:

- incorporation of innovative teaching methods and materials;
- encouragement of imaginative approaches to language teaching;

- opportunities for students to express creativity.

To assess each criterion systematically and consistently across observations a rating scale was developed, where 5 represents excellent ability, 4 indicates above-average ability, 3 signifies average ability, 2 denotes below-average ability, and 1 reflects minimal ability. The observation results were interpreted quantitatively and qualitatively. The findings are presented in *Table 2*.

Table 2

The results of EFL Methodology classes' observation

Soft skill	Scores (%)				
	Excellent ability	Above average ability	Average ability	Below average ability	Minimal ability
Communication	25%	43,7%	25%	6,2%	0%
Collaboration	50%	31,2%	18,8%	0%	0%
Critical thinking	18,8%	37,5%	28,1%	9,4%	6,2%
Creativity	21,9%	46,8%	21,9%	9,4%	0%

By analyzing the results, it was found out that a quarter of the observed students (25%) demonstrate excellent communication abilities, while a significant portion (nearly half) have above-average skills (43.7%). Additionally, a quarter of the students exhibits average communication abilities (25%). Only a small percentage (6.2%) falls into the below-average category, with none displaying minimal communication skills. In terms of collaboration skills, the majority of students (50%) demonstrates excellent abilities, while around one-third (31.2%) has above-average abilities. A small number of students (18.8%) shows an average level of collaboration abilities. Remarkably, there are no observations of below-average or minimal collaboration skills. As for the critical thinking skills, they are more evenly distributed, with fewer students (18.8%) demonstrating excellent abilities compared to communication and collaboration. The largest portion falls into the above-average category (37.5%). Similar to communication skills, creativity shows a distribution where nearly half of the students (46.8%) exhibits above-average abilities, while around one-fifth (21.9%) demonstrates excellent or average abilities. There are no observations of minimal creativity skills.

Overall, these results indicate a generally positive picture regarding students' soft skills development within the EFL Methodology classes. Communication and collaboration skills are notably strong among the majority of students; with significant proportions demonstrating above-average or excellent abilities. Critical thinking skills are more evenly distributed, with a considerable portion falling into the above-average category. Similarly, creativity skills show a favorable distribution, with a significant number of students displaying above-average abilities. Though there is room for improvement, particularly in critical thinking, the results suggest a solid foundation in soft skills development among the observed students. In summation, the obtained results prove that the EFL Methodology course provides good opportunities for developing soft skills.

In conclusion, the study explored the activities used for developing 4C skills (critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration) within the EFL Methodology classroom. Through a questionnaire administered to 8 English teachers, prevalent activities

for each skill were identified. Among the prominent activities for critical thinking were problem-solving and case studies, while role-playing and research projects were favored for fostering creativity. Communication skills were often developed through debate and oratory, while cooperative learning and think-pair-share were popular for collaboration.

Observations of EFL Methodology classes at Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University further evaluated the extent of soft skill development. Students' abilities in the 4C skills were assessed by means of a rating scale. The findings revealed generally positive outcomes, with communication and collaboration skills particularly strong. Critical thinking and creativity skills showed promising distributions, indicating room for improvement but also a solid foundation.

Overall, the study suggests that the EFL Methodology course offers substantial opportunities for developing soft skills in pre-service English teachers. These findings underscore the importance of integrating such activities into language teaching methodologies to equip students with essential skills beyond language proficiency.

However, this study does not cover all the aspects of the research issue. The development of 4C skills over an extended period can be in focus of further research. This could provide insights into the long-term effectiveness of different teaching methodologies and activities in fostering these skills. Additionally, students' perceptions and experiences of 4C skills development in the EFL Methodology classroom could be explored providing valuable insights into which activities they find most engaging and effective, as well as any barriers they encounter in developing these skills.

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