

English Trainee Teachers' Perspective on Soft Skills Development in Ukraine

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Abstract

The integration of soft skills in training pre-service teachers ensures higher academic performance and provides them with better career opportunities. However, many university teachers pay insufficient attention to developing soft skills in higher education. The article aims to investigate the correlation between the soft skills included in professional teacher training and undergraduates' viewpoint on soft skills development at university. The authors formulated three research questions: (a) How do English trainee teachers assess their soft skills? (b) How much attention, in students' opinion, do teachers pay to developing soft skills? (c) Is there a gap between teachers' work on developing students' soft skills and trainee teachers' expectations? To answer these questions, the researchers analyzed the empirical data received through a questionnaire. The questionnaire was completed by 153 English trainee teachers studying at H.S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, Ukraine. The respondents answered two close-ended questions regarding the level of soft skills they believe to possess and the amount of time devoted to soft skills development. The findings suggest that most students consider the level of their soft skills intermediate or high. Nevertheless, a significant number of the respondents still feel that teachers pay insufficient or hardly any attention to improving these skills. It is necessary to conduct further research to analyze university teachers' viewpoint on improving students' soft skills and organize the development of soft skills which would meet trainee teachers' expectations.

Keywords: English trainee teachers, higher education, professional teacher training, soft skills

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Introduction

In the increasingly competitive globalized and technologically advanced world, successful specialists should demonstrate not only a high level of professional or 'hard' skills but also the ability to cooperate, communicate and solve problems. This ability is often referred to as *soft skills*. According to Wats and Wats (2009), hard skills are discipline-specific skills that are necessary to perform essential work duties, while soft skills define one's approach to work and life-related problems. In other words, hard skills are the academic skills, experience, level of expertise, knowledge needed to perform a job, and soft skills are behaviors and characteristics demonstrated by employees unconsciously (Wats & Wats, 2009). Haselberger, Oberhuemer, Perez, Cinque, and Capasso (2012) defined soft skills as a combination of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, interpersonal, intellectual and practical skills, and ethical values. The researchers added that soft skills help people adapt and behave positively. As a result, a person can deal effectively with the challenges of both professional and everyday life. The latter is a necessary attribute of a future employee in any workplace. The combination of good soft and hard skills is a crucial factor of professional growth. Thus, their parallel development is one of the aims of modern higher education.

Rationale of the Study

Soft skills are of paramount importance for newly qualified specialists, young foreign language teachers in particular. They often fail to cooperate with their colleagues efficiently, to analyze, evaluate and find adequate solutions to pedagogical situations that may occur regularly in teaching. Their lack of experience and inability to work with others may result in selecting inappropriate teaching methods and techniques. This affects students' language acquisition and their general performance at school. Therefore, integration of soft skills in programs for training future foreign language teachers presents them with better career prospects. It also increases their prospective students' chances to learn the foreign language successfully.

The Bachelor's Educational Program (*Educational Program*, 2020) in H.S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, Ukraine, where the current study was conducted, does not provide for stand-alone subjects, which would enable trainee teachers to acquire soft skills on a formal basis. Thus, the development of soft skills becomes an integral part of the subjects taught. The significant number of the soft skills which graduates are supposed to demonstrate and the complexity of the process of soft skills integration and development may become a cause for their neglect at university. This may be detrimental to future teachers' professional training. For these reasons, the current study aims to investigate the correlation between the soft skills English trainee teachers are supposed to acquire by the time they graduate from university and students' viewpoints on developing these skills by their teachers.

Significance of the Study

The student-centered approach commonly used in higher education all over the world requires applying self-assessment methods and taking into account students' preferences in teaching and learning. The current study will be of use to educationalists involved in training pre-service teachers of English. The research will help to define the level of soft skills students possess, in their opinion. It will also provide an opportunity to find out whether trainee teachers of English are satisfied with the amount of attention paid to developing their soft skills at university.

Moreover, it will enable the researchers to examine which soft skills need more attention, from students' perspective. If the empirical data prove that the development of soft skills at university does not meet students' expectations, the findings may promote the reconsidering of the teaching methods currently used in training pre-service teachers of English. This will make professional teacher training more effective.

Research Questions

The study will answer the following research questions:

- How do English trainee teachers assess their soft skills?
- How much attention, in students' opinion, do teachers pay to developing soft skills?
- Is there a gap between teachers' work on developing students' soft skills and trainee teachers' expectations?

Research Objectives

To achieve the aim of the study and investigate the research questions, it is necessary to accomplish the following objectives:

- to outline the soft skills essential for teachers of English;
- to single out soft skills which teachers neglect or pay little attention to, from students' perspective;
- to analyze and interpret the received empirical data.

Review of Literature

Over the last decades, one can observe extensive research in developing future specialists' soft skills. A significant number of researchers emphasized the need for soft skills integration in future specialists' training programs (Abbas & Hum, 2013; Bartel, 2018; Dharmarajan, Pachigalla, & Lanka, 2012; Haselberger et al., 2012; Jones & Thirunagari, 2019; Rao, 2019; Sasirekha & Jayalakshmi, 2016; Tevdovska, 2015; Wats & Wats, 2009). Many studies include the analysis of the nature of soft skills and attempts to classify them. Abbas and Hum (2013) described the nature of soft skills in teaching and learning English. The researchers defined soft skills as skills possessed by everyone to support their life since one's success is not only influenced by their intelligence but also their ability to communicate and cooperate. They include communication skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, teamwork, lifelong learning and information management skills, entrepreneurship skills, ethics and professional morals, leadership skills. Some of these skills were also analyzed in the study conducted by Haselberger et al. (2012). The researchers arranged a clustering of soft skills into personal, social, and content-reliant/methodological. Personal skills are ability to learn, professional ethics, tolerance to stress, commitment, creativity/innovation, life balance, self-awareness. Communication, teamwork, contact network, negotiation, conflict management, leadership, culture adaptability are examples of social skills. Customer/user orientation, continuous improvement, adaptability to changes, results orientation, analysis skills, decision making, management skills, research and information management belong to content-reliant/methodological skills. The scholars also formulated the learning outcomes for them and presented a mini-curriculum consisting of a cluster of soft skills. Dharmarajan et al. (2012) suggest a similar classification. They put soft skills into three categories: qualities that can be acquired (skills and knowledge), skills which are necessary for social interaction, skills present

within the individual. In contrast, Bartel (2018) narrowed down the study to four soft skills necessary for employability (handshakes, the willingness to engage in small talks, making small talk, and asking questions) and outlined some lesson ideas to teach them. Kazachiner (2019) defined soft skills essential for an inclusively competent foreign language teacher. They are love to children, positive perception of a learner with special educational needs, communication skills, pedagogical tact, cooperation with parents, colleagues, school administration. By carrying out a review of recent scientific literature, Fernandes, Jardim, and Lopes (2021) pointed out even more soft skills which scholars consider essential for special education teachers. They are resilience, reflexivity, empathy, collaborative work, self-efficacy, creativity, and effective communication.

There are different views on developing students' soft skills. Wats and Wats (2009) put forward several recommendations to make the development of soft skills more responsive to the growth of an individual and the society. The scholars emphasized the need to make the curriculum of the courses more explicit. That would provide clarity to students in terms of methods, media, and approaches for developing both hard and soft skills. In addition to the development of soft skills along with discipline-specific skills, the scholars suggested incorporating a few credit-based courses with the assessment of soft-skills in the curriculum. Dharmarajan et al. (2012) expressed a different opinion. The researchers pointed out that there is no need to introduce new subjects to develop future specialists' soft skills. In their view, it is necessary to embed soft skills in the methodology of hard skills courses. By doing this, teachers will not have to change the curriculum. The scholars also emphasized that hard and soft skills are sometimes difficult to differentiate between since "a subject or topic may be considered a Soft Skill in one area but may come under the hard skills area in a different subject" (Dharmarajan et al., 2012, p. 2). Abbas and Hum (2013) shared the same opinion. They suggested integrating soft skills in the lesson plan in the section of instructional materials, instructional activities, and assessment. Tang, Chan, and Vetriveilmany (2015) also regard interweaving soft skills with the current course content to be the most practical way of instilling trainee teachers' soft skills. Almost no changes need to be made to the course structure. The researchers stated that teaching style should be student-centered with students' active participation and the teacher performing the role of a facilitator. In contrast, Tevdovska (2015) analyzed two ways of integrating soft skills in undergraduate curricular. The first way involved creating a separate university course with the development of soft skills as its primary objective. The second one included soft skills training as an integral part of other courses. The researcher considered both ways impractical. The former would require the program to go through a complicated accreditation process. The latter would be too burdensome for the lecturers. Therefore, the researcher suggested including soft skills as an integral component of language courses. Such courses involve a lot of communication and improve students' soft skills naturally.

Despite profound theoretical elaboration of soft skills definition, their classification, and development, issues regarding English trainee teachers' perspective on developing their soft skills at university have received little attention. Noah and Aziz (2020) conducted questionnaires and interviews to investigate the development of English trainee teachers' critical thinking and problem-solving skills, entrepreneurial skills, and moral and professional ethics. The empirical data showed that the most developed skills, in students' opinion, are critical thinking and problem-solving. Mundia (2020) investigated the development of essential instructional skills in initial Brunei trainee teachers. One of the research objectives was to determine the skill areas in which

pre-service teachers considered themselves competent. The findings revealed that the qualities on which the respondents self-reported to have a high level are: Effective communicator; Flexible; Good listener; Rapport; Respectful, etc. Nevertheless, it is necessary to conduct further research to define: (a) which soft skills remain underdeveloped, from trainee teachers' perspective, (b) whether English trainee teachers think that enough attention is paid to their soft skills improvement.

Methods

To facilitate the conduct of the study and minimize subjectivity, the authors applied a quantitative online survey research method. It simplifies the collection of large sets of data from the sample using pre-designed questionnaires. This method is also practical in terms of the amount of time spent on carrying it out. It enables researchers to involve all the respondents simultaneously and ensures automatic systematization of the data.

Participants

The sample consisted of 153 trainee teachers of English (52 2nd-year students, 49 3^d-years students, 52 4th-year students for the academic year 2020/2021). They were aged between 18 and 22. 24 of them are male, 129 respondents are female. All the participants study at the Faculty of Foreign Philology in H.S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, Kharkiv, Ukraine.

Instruments

The researchers designed and administered a questionnaire online through Google Forms. The questionnaire included two close-ended questions. To ensure better response rates and accuracy of the findings, the researchers did not collect students' email addresses making the questionnaire anonymous. Responses were limited to one response per user. Simple statistical tools were used to analyze the received data.

Procedures

To determine the soft skills which are indispensable for effective teaching of English, the researchers analyzed the findings of recent investigations into trainee teachers' soft skills development (Kazachiner, 2019; Hassan & Maharoff, 2014; Hassan, Maharoff, Abiddin, & Ro'is, 2015; Mailool, Retnawate, Arifin, Kesuma, & Putranta, 2020; Moskovkin & Shamonina, 2020; Skura & Świdarska, 2021; Slizkova, Kungurova & Fadich, 2018; Tang, Chan & Vetriveilmany, 2015; Tang, Hashim, & Mohd, 2015; Tang, Mohd & Hashim, 2015; Thangam, Rengarajan, & Geetha, 2020), Bachelor's Educational Program "English Language and Literature in Educational Institutions" designed for Bachelor's level students at H.S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University where the present study was conducted (*Educational Program*, 2020), and the ELT Methodology Curriculum developed within the joint project of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine and the British Council, Ukraine, "New Generation School Teacher" (Bevz et al., 2020). The results of the analysis enabled the authors to include four groups of soft skills in the questionnaire:

- 1) Interaction and communication skills (good command of Ukrainian and English for active communication in scientific, pedagogical, and social spheres following the principles of tolerance, dialogue, and cooperation; effective and respectful work in a team to achieve a common goal);

- 2) Higher-order thinking skills (recognition and analysis of difficult situations, finding suitable solutions; generating innovative ideas; critical evaluation of the acquired experience in terms of recent scientific and social advances; critical evaluation of information);
- 3) Self-management skills (self-improvement, self-study, self-regulation, self-organization, time management, life-long learning);
- 4) Modern information technology skills (effective use of modern information technology to locate information, study and teach others).

The researchers personally contacted the trainee teachers of English, who study at H.S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, at a pre-arranged off-line meeting to inform them about the aim of the survey, its anonymity, and the procedure. All the students present at the meeting gave their consent to participate in the study and complete the questionnaire on the designated date and time.

After the participants completed the questionnaire, the researchers systematized all the quantitative data. The indices of students' perceptions on the level of their soft skills and the teachers' attention to the development of these skills were compared and contrasted. The interpretation of the results of the questionnaire was also provided.

Results

The results of the questionnaire are presented in the tables below.

Table 1. *Students' perceptions on the development of interaction and communication skills*

Interaction and communication skills	Students' responses (%)																	
	Question 1. Do you think you have a high, intermediate, or low level of the skills below?									Question 2. Do you think your teachers devote sufficient, insufficient, or hardly any attention to developing the skills below?								
	high			intermediate			low			sufficient			insufficient			hardly any		
	Year of studying at university																	
	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th
teamwork	17.3	32.7	36.5	75	55.1	57.7	7.7	12.2	5.8	53.8	67.3	44.2	32.7	18.4	46.2	13.5	14.3	9.6
clearly expressing yourself	19.2	16.3	28.8	71.2	67.3	65.4	9.6	16.3	5.8	53.8	51	65.4	34.6	36.7	25	11.5	12.2	9.6
listening to others	59.6	67.3	69.2	34.6	26.5	28.8	5.8	6.1	2	71.2	73.5	78.8	25	24.5	19.2	3.8	2	2
treating others tolerantly and respectfully	71.2	71.4	73.1	26.9	24.5	23.1	1.9	4.1	3.8	57.7	69.4	57.7	32.7	22.4	34.6	9.6	8.2	7.7

Table one reveals that the majority of 2nd-year students (75%) assess their level of teamwork skills as intermediate, 17.3% believe that they have a high level of these skills, and only 7.7% think that their ability to work in a team is low. At the same time, 32.7% consider that

teachers pay insufficient attention to developing students' teamwork skills, and 13.5% think that hardly any attention is devoted to teamwork at university.

More than 50% of 3^d- and 4th-year students chose the option 'intermediate' for assessing their teamwork skills, and about a third of them opted for 'high'. 12.2% and 5.8% of 3^d- and 4th-year students correspondingly selected the option 'low'. Still, a significant number of 3^d-year (32.7%) and 4th-year (55.8%) undergraduates believe that insufficient or hardly any attention is paid to teamwork.

The ability to clearly express oneself was assessed as intermediate by the absolute majority of students, regardless of the year of studying. Meanwhile, 46.1% of 2nd-year students, 48.9% of 3^d-year trainee teachers, and 34.6% of 4th-year undergraduates believe that teachers pay hardly any or insufficient attention to improving this skill at university.

The ability to listen to others was ranked as high by 59.6% of 2nd-year students, 67.3% of 3^d-year students, and 69.2% of 4th-year trainee teachers. More than 70% of them suppose that enough attention is devoted to developing this skill. On the other hand, many future teachers (more than 20%) are not satisfied with the amount of teachers' attention to the improvement of listening skills.

The results are similar for the ability to treat others tolerantly and respectfully, with more than 70% of students assessing its level as high and more than 30% believing that not enough or hardly any attention is devoted to its development.

Table 2. *Students' perceptions on the development of higher-order thinking skills*

Higher-order thinking skills	Students' responses (%)																	
	Question 1. Do you think you have a high, intermediate, or low level of the skills below?									Question 2. Do you think your teachers devote sufficient, insufficient, or hardly any attention to developing the skills below?								
	high			intermediate			low			sufficient			insufficient			hardly any		
Year of studying at university																		
	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th
recognizing, analyzing, and finding solutions to problems	25	40.8	53.8	67.3	46.9	44.2	7.7	12.2	2	51.9	65.3	59.6	36.5	22.4	30.8	11.5	12.2	9.6
evaluating information critically	26.9	38.8	40.4	65.4	53.1	53.8	7.7	8.2	5.8	51.9	65.3	63.5	34.6	26.5	28.8	13.5	8.2	7.7
evaluating your own experience	42.3	34.7	40.4	48.1	57.1	55.8	9.6	8.2	3.8	50	61.2	63.5	30.8	28.6	25	19.2	10.2	11.5
generating innovative ideas	13.5	24.5	21.2	50	57.1	65.4	36.5	18.4	13.5	40.4	51	40.4	30.8	32.7	40.4	28.8	16.3	9.2

Table two shows that more than 90% of the respondents, irrespective of the year of studying, think that they are good or very good at recognizing, analyzing, and finding solutions to problems, evaluating information and their own experience. However, more than a third of trainee teachers consider that these soft skills need more attention.

The indices for the ability to generate new ideas are much lower, with 36.5% of 2nd-year students, 18.4% of 3^d-year students, and 13.5% of 4th-year ones assessing their level of this skill as low. Though the percentage of students demonstrating this opinion decreases with the amount of their professional training, almost 60% of 4th-year trainee teachers feel that hardly any or not enough attention is given to this skill.

Table 3. *Students' perceptions on the development of self-management skills*

Self-management skills	Students' responses (%)																	
	Question 1. Do you think you have a high, intermediate, or low level of the skills below?									Question 2. Do you think your teachers devote sufficient, insufficient, or hardly any attention to developing the skills below?								
	high			intermediate			low			sufficient			insufficient			hardly any		
	Year of studying at university																	
	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th
studying autonomously	46.2	38.8	48.1	38.5	51	42.3	15.4	10.2	9.6	59.6	67.3	67.3	28.8	20.4	23.1	11.5	12.2	9.6
managing your time	26.9	28.6	11.5	55.8	44.8	61.5	17.3	26.5	26.9	46.2	49	34.6	25	28.6	42.3	28.8	22.4	23.1
managing disruptive emotions	32.7	14.3	13.5	46.2	61.2	67.3	21.2	24.5	19.2	48.1	46.9	50	25	36.7	38.5	26.9	16.3	11.5
organizing yourself	36.5	36.7	23.1	50	38.8	61.5	13.5	24.5	15.4	46.2	57.1	55.8	26.9	28.6	28.8	26.9	14.3	15.4

As seen in Table three, the most developed self-management skill, according to students' opinion, is the ability to study autonomously. Only 15.4% of 2nd-year trainee teachers, 10.2% of 3^d-year students, and 9.6% of 4th-year undergraduates believe that they possess a low level of this skill. However, the number of the respondents who marked the amount of teachers' attention to this skill as 'insufficient' or 'low' is still high, amounting to 40.3% of 2nd-year students, 32.6% of 3^d-year students, and 32.7% of 4th-year undergraduates.

Assessing the ability to manage one's time, 26.9% of 2nd-year students, 28.6% of 3^d-year students, and 11.5% of 4th-year students consider its level high. 55.8%, 44.8% and 61.5% of 2nd-, 3^d- and 4th-year trainee teachers correspondingly selected the option 'intermediate'. Thus, most future teachers consider that they are good or very good at managing their time. Meanwhile, the number of students who think that they possess a low level of this soft skill increases from 17.3% to 26.9% with the year of studying at university. Moreover, the absolute majority of undergraduates believe that teachers pay insufficient or hardly any attention to developing this skill amounting to 53.8% of 2nd-year students, 51% of 3^d-year students, and 65.4% of 4th-year ones.

Regarding the ability to manage disruptive emotions, the number of students who are of the view they possess a high level of this skill decreases with the year of studying from 32.7% to 13.5%. The percentage of those who chose the option 'intermediate' increases from 46.2% of 2nd-year trainee teachers to 67.3% of the 4th-year students. At the same time, the indices of 2nd- and 4th-year students who marked the level of this skill as low are different only by 2%.

The data for the ability to organize oneself are similar. While the percentage of students who believe they possess a high level of this skill decreases from 36.5% (2nd-year trainee teachers) to 23.1% (4th-year trainee teachers), the number of those who chose the option 'low' increases by almost 2%. The respondents' replies to the first question are consistent with their opinion in response to the second question: 53.8% of 2nd-year trainee teachers, 42.9% of 3^d-year students, and 44.2% of 4th-year ones consider that teachers devote insufficient attention or almost neglect the process of developing self-organization skills.

Table 4. *Students' perceptions on the development of modern information technology skills*

Modern information technology skills	Students' responses (%)																	
	Question 1. Do you think you have a high, intermediate, or low level of the skills below?									Question 2. Do you think your teachers devote sufficient, insufficient, or hardly any attention to developing the skills below?								
	high			intermediate			low			sufficient			insufficient			hardly any		
	Year of studying at university																	
	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th
using modern technology to find information	71.2	73.5	84.6	26.9	20.4	15.4	1.9	6.1	0	55.8	69.4	75	30.8	22.4	15.4	13.5	8.2	9.6
using modern technology to study	63.5	65.3	73.1	34.6	28.6	26.9	1.9	6.1	0	57.7	71.4	71.2	36.5	20.4	19.2	5.8	8.2	9.6
using modern technology to teach others	30.8	30.6	46.2	53.8	59.2	44.2	15.4	10.2	9.6	54.9	53.1	61.5	31.4	32.7	26.9	13.7	14.3	11.5

Table four demonstrates that the replies to the questions about modern information technology skills vary depending on the skills and the year of studying. 71.2% of 2nd-year students, 73.5% of 3^d-year students, and 84.6% of 4th-year undergraduates assess their level of using modern technology to find information as high. The ability to use modern technology to study was ranked as high by 63.5% of 2nd- and 3^d-year students and 73.1% of 4th-year trainee teachers. The identical percentage of students opted for 'low' when assessing the two skills mentioned above: 1.9% of 2nd-year future teachers, 6.1% of 3^d-year undergraduates, and none of the 4th-year students. Still, a significant number of trainee teachers feel that the development of these skills receive not enough or hardly any attention at university. However, this number decreases with the year of studying

from 44.3% to 25% for the ability to use modern information technology to find information and from 42.3% to 28.8% for the ability to use modern technology to study.

The level of the skill to use information technology to teach others is not as high as the level of the previous two skills. Only 30.8% of 2nd-year undergraduates chose the option 'high', although this number increases by 15.4% by the 4th year of studying at university. Moreover, the percentage of the respondents who ranked this soft skill level as 'low' decreases from 15.4% (2nd-year students) to 9.6% (4th-year students). In reply to the second question, 31.4% of the 2nd-year students, 32.7% of 3^d-year trainee teachers, and 26.9% of 4th-year undergraduates believe that teachers pay insufficient attention to the development of the ability to use modern technology to teach others and more than 10% of the respondents of each year of studying believe that hardly any attention is devoted to this skill.

Table 5. Average indices of students' perceptions on the development of their soft skills

Groups of soft skills	Students' responses (%)																	
	Question 1. Do you think you have a high, intermediate, or low level of the skills below?									Question 2. Do you think your teachers devote sufficient, insufficient, or hardly any attention to developing the skills below?								
	high			intermediate			low			sufficient			insufficient			hardly any		
	Year of studying at university																	
	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th	2 nd	3 ^d	4 th
Interaction and communication skills	41.8	46.9	51.9	51.9	43.4	43.8	6.3	9.7	4.4	59.1	65.3	61.5	31.3	25.5	31.3	9.6	9.2	7.2
Higher-order thinking skills	26.9	34.7	39	57.7	53.6	54.8	15.4	11.8	6.3	48.6	60.7	56.8	33.2	27.6	31.3	18.3	11.7	12
Self-management skills	35.6	29.6	24.1	47.6	49	58.2	16.9	21.4	17.8	50	55.1	51.9	26.4	28.6	33.2	23.5	16.3	14.9
Modern information technology skills	55.2	56.5	68	38.4	36.1	28.8	6.4	7.5	3.2	56.1	64.6	69.2	32.9	25.2	20.5	11	10.2	10.2
Overall indices	39.9	41.9	45.8	48.9	45.5	46.4	11.3	12.6	7.9	53.5	61.4	59.9	31	26.7	29.1	15.6	11.9	11.1

As shown in Table five, most students assess their level of interaction and communication skills as intermediate or high, with only 6.3% of 2nd-year students, 9.7% of 3^d-year trainee teachers, and 4.4% of 4th-year participants selecting the option 'low'. However, a significant number of the respondents believe that teachers pay insufficient or hardly any attention to the development of these skills.

More students opted for 'low' assessing their higher-order thinking skills. However, the number of such students decreases with the amount of professional training and constitutes 15.4% of 2nd-year undergraduates, 11.8% of 3^d-year students, and 6.3% of 4th-year pre-service teachers.

The indices for the option 'hardly any' in Question 2 are also higher than in the previous group of skills.

The quantitative data also suggest that self-management skills are the least developed skills, in students' opinion. About 17% of 2nd-year students assessed their level as low. This number increases by 4.5% for 3^d-year trainee teachers, and about 1% for 4th-year students. The percentage of the respondents who consider the attention to the development of self-management skills insufficient also increases with the duration of training from 26.4% to 33.2%. In contrast, the number of 4th- and 3^d-year participants who believe that their teachers pay hardly any attention to the development of self-management skills is much lower than the corresponding index received from 2nd-year respondents.

The analysis of the students' answers regarding modern information technology skills indicates that, from undergraduates' perspective, these skills are the most developed ones since the percentage of students who selected the option 'low' here is the smallest. Meanwhile, according to a considerable number of the respondents, the development of all modern information technology skills needs more attention.

On the whole, most respondents assessed the level of their soft skills as high or intermediate. The absolute majority of the participant also think that the development of soft skills receives sufficient attention at university. At the same time, there are many students (46.6% of 2nd-year trainee teachers, 38.6% of 3^d-year respondents, and 40.2% of 4th-year participants) who believe that their teachers devote insufficient or hardly any attention to soft skills development.

Discussion

The comparison of the received data shows that, from trainee teachers' perspective, such soft skills as listening to other people, tolerance and respect, autonomous studying, information technology use to find information and study have the highest level. Possible reasons for such results are as follows:

- Listening to others. Firstly, listening is a receptive skill which is easier to acquire than productive skills (e.g. speaking). Thus, students may feel more confident while listening to somebody than expressing themselves. Secondly, some university teachers still prefer traditional methods of teaching to the student-centered approach. These methods involve a lot of teacher talking time. Meanwhile, students do not have enough practice in speech production or interaction.
- Tolerance and respect. All the participants are 18 to 22 years old. Thus, they have had enough experience of interpersonal interaction and learnt to tolerate social differences. Besides, students' regular dealing with formal situations at university taught them to show respect to their teachers and each other.
- Autonomous studying. The Bachelor's Educational Program (*Educational Program*, 2020) incorporates a considerable amount of individual work in students' professional training. As a result, trainee teachers spend much time on processing information and completing assignments autonomously.
- Information technology use. It is evident that information technology became an integral part of students' education and daily life long ago. Moreover, due the pandemic, trainee teachers

have gained even more experience of using modern information technology tools, which are commonly applied in distance and blended education both to study and teach others.

On the contrary, the least developed skills are generating new ideas, managing one's time, dealing with negative emotions. There are the following plausible reasons for such findings:

- The ability to generate innovative ideas. Traditional teaching still used by some educators at university requires that students reproduce information rather than develop new ideas. Thus, trainee teachers may not feel confident enough when they need to think of a new approach to do something or create something original. On the other hand, with the year of studying, there is almost a threefold decrease in the percentage of students who consider the level of this skill low and believe that teachers devote hardly any attention to the issue. A possible reason behind this situation may lie in senior students performing more complex assignments. As a result, the other higher-order thinking skills are more developed and may enable students to cope with creative tasks.

- Time management. The increase of the number of students who assessed this skill as low with the year of studying may be caused by the increase of the number of everyday tasks senior students have to perform. In addition to studying at university, many participants have already started families and found jobs. Consequently, they may fail to manage their time affectively.

- Dealing with negative emotions. Firstly, trainee teachers may experience negative emotions due to the stress caused by the pandemic. Since social interaction is limited, students have to deal with their emotions on their own, which is challenging for many people. The fact that the level of this soft skill deteriorates from the 2nd- to the 4th-year of studying can be explained by high anxiety many senior students feel when they fail to keep a proper work-life balance.

The results of the current study show similarity with the previous research conducted by Mundia (2020). Its participants, who were trainee teachers, also considered themselves competent in listening to others and showing respect. However, the respondents of this study did not regard themselves as competent enough in modern technology. The findings also support the results received by Noah and Aziz (2020). In their study, most English trainee teachers who participated in the questionnaire shared the opinion that they are good at critical thinking and problem-solving.

Conclusion

The research aimed to define the level of pre-service teachers' soft skills and find out whether there is a gap between teachers' work on developing soft skills at university and trainee teachers' expectations. The empirical data suggest that the absolute majority of students assess their soft skills as intermediate or high. According to trainee teachers' opinion, their most developed skills are listening to others, treating other people with tolerance and respect, studying autonomously, using modern information technology to search for information and to study. Such skills as generating new ideas, managing one's time, dealing with negative emotions are, on the contrary, the least developed ones. One of the most important findings of the study is that the level of the last two skills is assessed lower and lower with each year of studying. It is unacceptable in professional teacher training. Since time management and emotional stability are of paramount importance for a teacher, this problem needs to be urgently addressed by the teaching staff and the university administration.

The findings also revealed that trainee teachers recognize the importance of soft skills in their professional and everyday life. A significant percentage of the respondents feel that teachers pay insufficient or hardly any attention to all the soft skills mentioned in the questionnaire. Therefore, the analysis of the received data indicates that many trainee teachers are not satisfied with the intermediate level of their soft skills and consider it necessary to devote more attention to soft skills development.

Further research in the area is needed to analyze university teachers' opinion on improving students' soft skills and ensure the balance between undergraduates' expectations and the efforts teachers direct at students' soft skills improvement.

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