

Soft Skills Formation during Professional-Oriented Teaching of Foreign Language to Higher Education Seekers

Lesia Hladkoscok

Candidate of Philological Sciences, PhD, Associate Professor, Department of Foreign Languages for Humanities, YuriyFedkovych Chernivtsi National University

ORCID identifier: 0000-0002-6447-4729

l.hladkoscok@chnu.edu.ua

TetianaBuhinska

PhD in Germanic Languages, Associate Professor, The Department of Foreign Languages for Humanities, "YuriyFedkovych Chernivtsi National University

ORCID identifier: 0000-0001-6190-5901

t.buhinska@chnu.edu.ua

Olena Botvinko-Botiuk

Ph.D. in Philology, Associate Professor of Foreign Languages Department, Department of Foreign Languages, Rivne National University of Water and Environmental Engineering

ORCID identifier: 0000-0002-8580-3544

o.m.botvinko-botiuk@nuwm.edu.ua

Oksana Tytun

Candidate of Pedagogical Sciences (Ph.D in Education), Associate Professor of Foreign Languages Department, Vasyl StefanykPrecarpathian National University

ORCID identifier:0000-0001-7926-1630

oksana.tytun@pnu.edu.ua

Olena Demianenko

PhD, Assistant of the department, Faculty of Law and Linguistics, Department of Slavic Philology, Pedagogy and Teaching Methods, BilaTserkva National Agrarian University

ORCID identifier: 0000-0001-6412-0077

ozaika@ukr.net

Abstract. Under the conditions of a fundamental paradigm shift in education, transition to interactive learning strategies, search for alternative forms in the educational process, new directions and educational ways of learning are stimulated, which are designed to develop not only professional skills but also soft skills as universal competences for the education of a qualified employee in modern labor markets, ability to solve complex problems, carry out effective work in a team. **This article aims** to analyze the meaning and characteristics of soft skills for candidates for higher education, as well as to characterize the extent of formation of this type of skills in the process of professionally-oriented foreign language teaching. **Methodology.** International research data, scientific periodicals, questionnaires, and research methods of soft skills development were used during the

research. Results. In the course of this research, the data on soft skills needed by employers, namely the heads of international companies represented in Ukraine, were obtained. Besides, the opinion of international HEIs leaders concerning the level of students' soft skills development was studied, and the questionnaire survey of students was conducted. It allowed us to point out the soft skills which are currently paid less attention than the needs. **The results** of this study are of significant importance for further methodological development of this type of skill in higher education.

Keywords: soft skills, flexible skills, social skills, higher education quality, competence, employment.

Introduction. According to British Council authors, learning a foreign language during vocationally-oriented studies is the most favorable area where students have an opportunity to successfully learn and practice soft skills (British Council, 2021).

In today's world of rapid change, globalization, and internationalization of education, soft skills for corporate communication are becoming increasingly important as a major factor in employment and as a key to success in science and work.

The purpose of professionally-oriented learning of a foreign language is to acquire the basics of foreign language skills necessary for professional intercultural communication, to master the basics of oral and written communication in a foreign language for use in information and communication activities, and to master the basics of oral and written forms of communication to acquire general cultural and professional competencies.

One of the topical problems in the theory and practice of learning a foreign language is the issue of increasing the effectiveness of mastering grammatical language skills since the educational training level of different degrees students cannot be assessed as satisfactory. This problem is very urgent, which requires finding the best way to organize the educational process for the formation of foreign language skills in higher education institutions that train specialists in economic, technical, and other fields. There is a need to control and develop knowledge of foreign language grammar, which can be achieved by developing effective methods and ways of organizing the educational process.

It should be emphasized that many valuable suggestions on the development of soft skills can be found in numerous English-language popular science publications: personal blogs of foreign educators, management consultants, HR managers, or on the websites of educational institutions (British Council, 2021). It confirms the importance of the necessity of forming this type of skill when learning a foreign language and also shows that this issue is mainly developed in practice, while its theoretical and scientific grounding remains rather superficial. However, in the world, especially in the European scientific and educational discourse, even today, there is still a positive trend in the development of this topic, as now there are thorough articles and publications of rehearsed and debatable nature, which address various aspects of soft skills as the most important skills needs of future specialists in foreign languages learning (Zh. Esmurzaeva, O. Novikova, S. Shylova, O. Suprun, N. Zaytseva, and others). For pedagogical practitioners and scientists to have a comprehensive and informed understanding of the nature and specificity of soft skills development in the context of foreign language teaching to out-of-state students, it is necessary to continue pedagogical research in this area.

Literature review. The term "soft skills" has been used in scientific research since the 1990s. It was one of the first to be used by specialists in the field of management in the USA and Germany, and later this concept appeared in the works of representatives of business and education. In addition to hard, technical skills, which include the performance of professional and professional tasks, "soft skills" were also considered.

It should be noted that the essence of the term "soft skills" is defined differently by researchers in the scientific literature. We share the opinion of those scientists who consider this term as the ability to successfully interact with the environment and cover several universal or special competencies (K.A. Koval, K.I. Perez Maya, I. Yasna, etc.). The list of soft skills includes the ability to effectively organize interpersonal communication, work in a team, think critically, negotiate, evaluate and make decisions, and solve complex problems (Drozdova & Dubinina, 2020).

An entirely new challenge for home pedagogy is the development of "soft skills" in college students. K. Koval sees the development of students' soft skills as one of the most important prerequisites for employment; S. Nahod confirms the importance of soft skills for the professional development of future specialists in socioeconomic professions; I. Garbuziuk analyzes the conceptual foundations of educational practices based on life skills.

It should be noted that scientific interest in the problem of the potential of higher education disciplines for the formation of soft skills is constantly growing, for example, studies by A. Bezus, G. Gushcha, A. Sazhienko, A. Kravets, A. Kurakin, T. Litvin, O. Starinets, etc. (Tymoschuk, 2021).

"Soft skills" means a set of non-professional and even super-professional skills necessary for successful participation in the work process, high performance, and, as opposed to specialized, non-specific activities. These types of skills may include the ability to work with people, use a range of communication abilities, speech skills, personal habits, cognitive or emotional empathy, time management skills, teamwork, and leadership skills.

When defining this term scientists, mostly focus on the specifics of their field of work, but almost every definition has a reference to the universality of the term "soft skills".

Chulanova O. identifies soft skills as a set of knowledge, skills, abilities, and motivational characteristics of an employee in the sphere of interaction between people, including the ability to manage time, persuasion, negotiation skills, leadership, demonstrate emotional intelligence, necessary for successful work and meeting the requirements put forward for the employee position and contributing to the achievement of the strategic goals of the organization.

This opinion is supported by Tapygina O., according to her position, soft skills are a set of personal qualities that increase the efficiency of interaction with other people in the professional sphere. From the researcher's point of view, such skills imply the ability to demonstrate and defend her ideas, coordinate her actions with the actions of others, show leadership qualities, etc. In defining the term "soft skills", the scholar puts special emphasis on the emotional qualities associated with interaction with others.

The importance of emotional intelligence is emphasized by other researchers, who argue that "soft skills" is the term used to describe EQ (Emotional Intelligence Quotient), which is several personality traits, social qualities, communication skills, speech development, and optimism that characterize relationships with others. These skills play the

biggest role in recruitment because it is usually believed that soft skills only effectively complement professional skills (Berkovich. & Kofanova & Tikhonova, 2018).

V. Davydova, under soft skills, understands the abilities that a person acquired through additional training and personal life experience and uses them for further development in the professional sphere. The researcher notes that these skills are highly valued both in the workplace and at work (Davidova, 2021).

It should be noted that all researchers, one way or another, in the meaning of the concept "soft skills" usually include a communicative component: the level of development of communicative abilities and skills, in a particular language, desire to communicate, desire to communicate, choice of the optimal communication style depending on the situation, the ability and readiness for interpersonal interaction, the ability to use different methods and techniques of communication (Kurinna, 2019).

European Union member states have adopted several documents allowing the introduction of a single classification of "soft skills" for the single European Economic Area. Initiatives to develop these types of skills included Rethinking Education, as well as advising EU member states on investing in skills development to improve their socio-economic performance. In 2018, 11 directives were adopted to introduce new teaching and learning methods to develop students' soft skills in EU universities, especially those related to digital and technological activities.

To make the new policy and its institutions work, an officially adopted classification and declaration called European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO) was developed, containing 1,384 skills needed in the labor market. These are skills related to communication, creativity, and management and determine the effectiveness of the thinking process (Mitchell, 2021).

Unlike hard skills, which can be shaped and developed, soft skills are more difficult to acquire and change (Rana, 2020). Similar trends in education and human resource policies exist in North America, Australia, and some developing countries (such as China and Malaysia). Many major U.S. research centers have studied the soft skills phenomenon, including the Institute for the Future in collaboration with the University of Phoenix.

Soft skills can be divided into four groups:

1. Social skills.

1.1 Cultural and multicultural competence.

1.2 Empathy and the ability to communicate with others.

1.3 Perceiving information expressed in a foreign language requires increased concentration from the person learning that language.

2. Mental Skills.

2.1 Creativity in problem-solving.

2.2 Multidisciplinary thinking.

3. Organizational talent.

3.1 Teamwork.

3.2 Presentation skills.

4. Personal skills.

4.1 Exposure.

4.2 Confidence.

4.3 Accountability.

4.4 Emotional stability.

4.5 Flexibility (Business Soft Skills durch Fremdsprachen, 2020).

In our opinion, one of the priority approaches to soft skills in the process of learning a foreign language is the consideration of appropriate skills, which are conventionally called 4C (Critical thinking; Creativity; Collaboration; Communication). It is reasonable to point out the most effective methodological methods allowing the integration of soft skills into foreign language teaching.

The basis for the development of soft skills in the process of learning a foreign language is communicative orientation. From the psychological point of view, communication is, first of all, a person's ability to shape a person's speech activity in its productive and receptive forms per the situation of communication.

To prepare students for communicative competence, it is not enough to fill the learning process with communicative exercises to solve actual problems. It is necessary to allow them to think independently and indicate possible ways of solving the set tasks.

According to the communicative-oriented approach of teaching a foreign language, the following areas of work come to the fore:

- writing papers, essays;
- preparation of reports, projects, research;
- preparation of public speeches/presentations using appropriate verbal means of communication and forms of discussion and debate. Such forms of interactive communication as negotiations, case studies, interviews, etc. are actively used.

To focus the teacher's activities on the development of "soft skills", it is necessary to change the format and technology of teacher-student interaction. Traditional forms of teaching in recent years are no longer so interesting for students. They are more interested in gamification, e-learning, m-learning, social learning. When planning forms of interaction with students during the learning process, it is important to take into account current trends:

- Make the transition from knowledge transfer to knowledge creation. As a rule, the availability and high speed of knowledge exchange allow to be more successful not those who know more, but those who get information faster and better by identifying, analyzing, and creating data.

- The transition from the usual "teacher-student" pattern of information transfer to interaction, collaboration, and teamwork.

- Transition from narrow specialization to cross-functional learning.

- It is desirable to use different combinations: classroom work, e-learning, projects (practical, social, etc.), simulations to maximize student participation and consolidate professional and soft skills.

According to a study by the World Economic Forum, by 2022, the percentage of new skills produced worldwide will rise from 16% to 27% in one year. Automation is expected to result in the loss of about 75 million jobs today, and at least 54% of the world's workers will need to be retrained to be competitive in the labor market (World Economic Forum, 2020). The realities of today are driving the development of new educational trends and leading to a fundamental change in the strategic goals of education and the transition to a new paradigm and innovative methods of learning.

Statistics from the World Economic Forum show that the 10 most important skills for 2020 are: integrated thinking; critical thinking; creativity; team management skills; interaction with people; emotional intelligence; ability to form own opinions and make decisions; customer orientation; ability to negotiate; flexibility of mind. According to numerous studies, there is a shift in focus from hard skills to soft skills for employees (World Economic Forum, 2020).

From the above, we can conclude that soft skills - the skills that will be successful in students' future careers - will help them succeed in a rapidly changing world.

Soft skills are important in the workplace as well as in other areas of life; most of the skills used to achieve goals are soft skills. At the same time, the higher a person goes up the career ladder, the greater the role of social skills in his life, and professional skills take second place because the higher the position, the more subordinates and employees who need advice on different topics (European Dictionary of Skills and Competencies, 2020).

Today, the availability of universal competencies, their constant and methodical development is the basis of a professional specialist's profile. Soft skills can be acquired not only during college education but also in courses, training, and with the help of many other, particularly interactive and remote development tools. A specialist with a high level of soft skills development will succeed in any sphere, activity, and interaction between people.

Today, the soft skills of young professionals are one of the main requirements of employers, so their development is an important part of the educational program. It is advisable to use interactive teaching methods in the process of learning foreign languages, as they allow creating communicative situations as close to real professional tasks as possible, which greatly facilitates adaptability in the workplace.

Thus, the importance of soft skills for the professional and personal development of a specialist is beyond doubt, while pedagogical and sociological studies show that the degree of employers' needs and the level of development of specific soft skills of international university students are currently understudied.

Aims. The study aims to analyze the necessity of soft skills development for a higher education applicant, as well as the peculiarities of this type of skills formation process in the process of professional foreign language teaching.

Materials and methods. The first part of the study presents data on changes in the share of new skills in the global labor market and the structure of skills needs of the world's leading companies. World Economic Forum 2020 statistics were used to assess trends in the need for new skills and specializations. To obtain data for the second part of the study a questionnaire survey of managers of companies and institutions of higher education was conducted. In addition, 100 students were interviewed using the Methodology of studying the characteristics of response to conflict K. Thomas. L. Thurston Zamfir's test was modified by A. Rean to assess the level of their soft skills training.

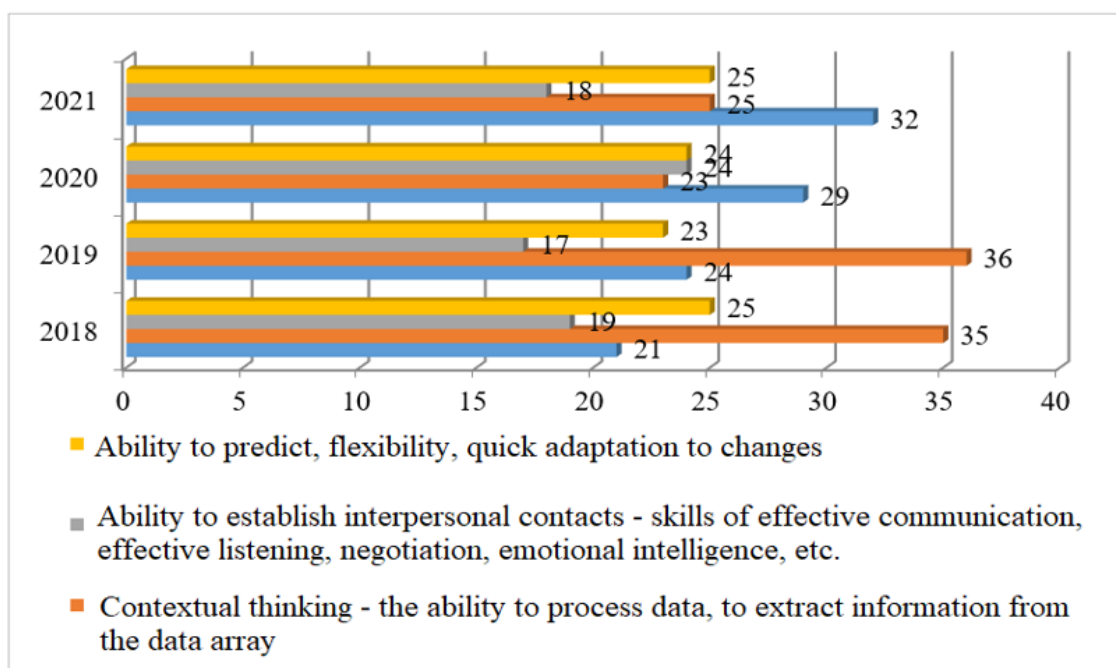
The study used analytical and synthetic methods in the study of theoretical and methodological foundations of soft skills definition and characteristics, comparative methods and analogy in the analysis and evaluation of indicators, classification methods in determining the characteristics of different types of soft skills, the method of systematization and generalization in the study of conclusions.

Results. To practically study employers' needs and universities' opportunities to develop key soft skills specialists, we conducted a questionnaire survey among education applicants, managers of international companies, and international universities present in Ukraine.

In the process of this research, we studied the opinion of 30 CEO of international companies with offices in Ukraine in 2018-2021. These surveys showed that during the next 5 years employers will look for professionals with the following personality traits (soft skills):

1. Ability to solve complex problems.
2. Contextual thinking-the ability to process data, to extract information from a data set.
3. Interpersonal networking skills - effective communication, effective listening, negotiation, emotional intelligence, etc.
4. Predictability, flexibility, quick adaptation to changes. The respondents were asked to indicate the importance of these characteristics as a percentage (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The most important features of professionals' soft skills from the viewpoint of international company leaders, %.

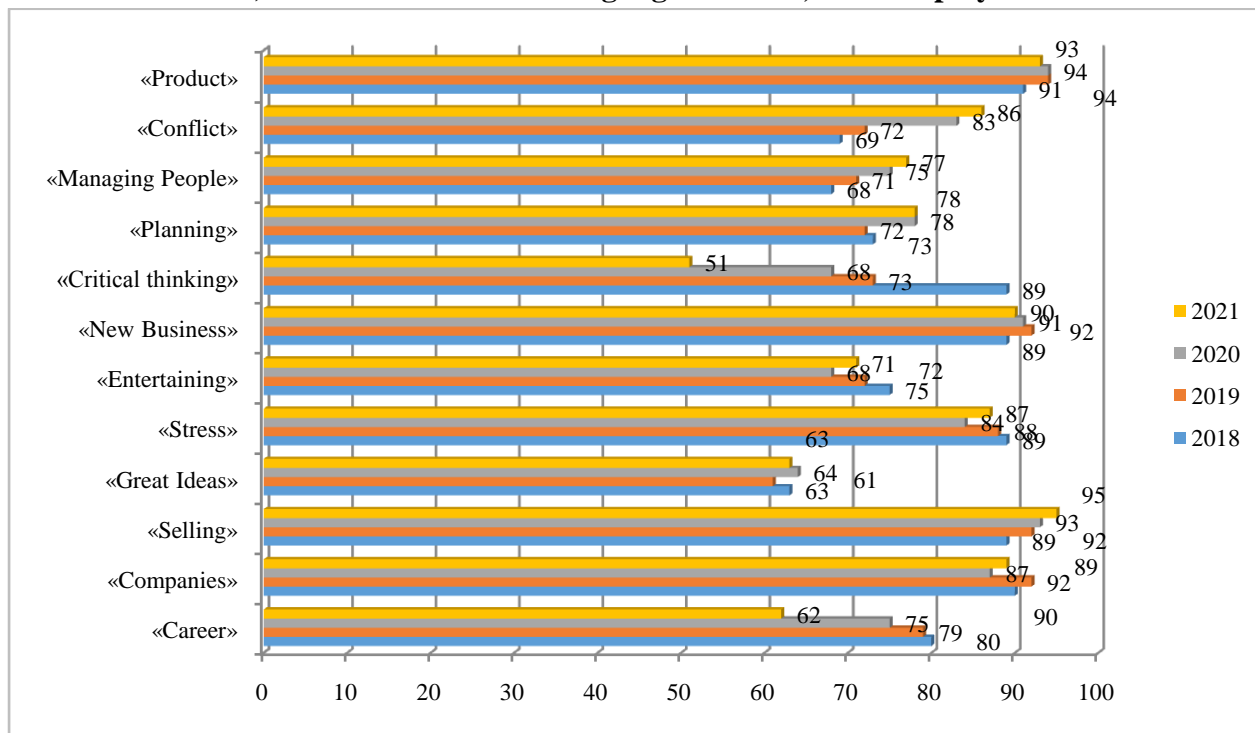


As seen in Figure 1, the most important trait for professionals, according to employers, is "Contextual Thinking and Data Processing Skills," although the dynamics of this trait are negative, with this trait being rated 25% on average in 2021 compared to 35% in 2018. "Ability to network" and "Ability to predict" have relatively stable percentages of importance from employers' perspectives of 18-19% and 23-25%, respectively. At the same time, the need for professionals with the quality "Ability to solve complex problems" increased from 21% to 32% over the study period.

Studying the capacities of domestic and foreign HEIs working in Ukraine and training specialists in language specialties, according to the subjective opinion of HEI managers, their

possibilities to develop soft skills concerning the employers' needs are the following at the end of 2021 (Figure 2).

Figure 2. HR, technical and methodological capacity of HEIs (from the viewpoint of HEIs leaders) to teach soft skills to language students, % of employers' needs.



As the survey results show for the leaders of higher education institutions, future specialists have the highest percentage of readiness on product skills ("Product" category) and communication skills ("Companies"), personal skills necessary to start their own business, and personal skills necessary for effective sales.

Institutions of higher education were least ready for the formation of "Critical Thinking" and "Great Ideas" skills among students, most likely due to the rapid growth of relevant requirements for professionals, given the rapid development of information and communication technologies.

The results of this survey confirm the findings of the World Economic Forum's 2020 report, according to which the top 10 key competencies that will be relevant in the next 5 years include:

1. Analytical thinking and innovative approaches;
2. Ability to learn quickly;
3. Integrated problem solving;
4. Critical thinking and analysis;
5. Initiative, creativity, and creative approaches;
6. Leadership and social influence;
7. Technology implementation, monitoring, and control;
8. 8. Technological design and programming;
9. Stress resistance, adaptability, and flexibility;

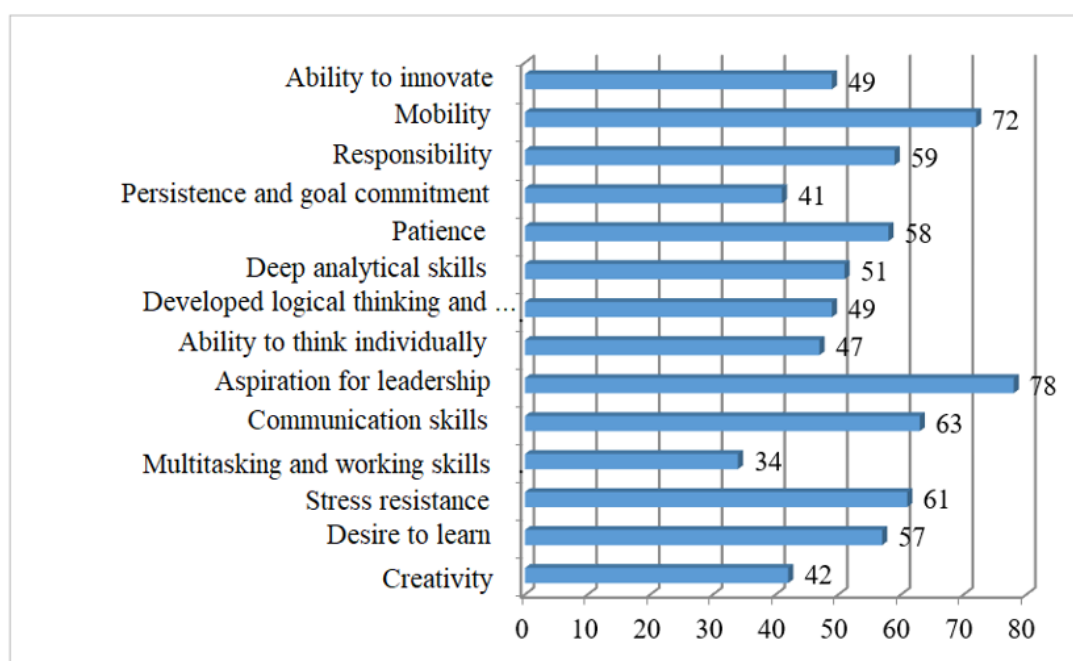
10. Logical thinking and ideology.

During the research, we studied the development level of the issue of soft skills formation in pedagogical scientific works, which allowed us to identify the lack of quality of developed methodological recommendations and organization of educational process on the use of methods of soft skills formation in higher educational institutions. We developed criteria according to which we evaluated the effectiveness of the educational process of both traditional and non-traditional teaching methods in the formation of "soft skills".

Considering the level of significance of all types of criteria for assessing the level of soft skills formation, we calculated the average score and, accordingly, the final result based on the average value of quantitative indicators.

The result of the survey is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Soft skills formation level (according to the survey results) of higher education students during professional-oriented foreign language teaching, %.



Analyzing the survey results, we concluded that students are interested in the formation of soft skills, they understand their need for professional activities, but the level of education of this type of skills does not meet the requirements of employers.

Discussion. Thus, the study considered the necessity and the actual level of soft skills training in the process of professional foreign language teaching of higher education students.

During this study, it was found that unlike professional skills, which are easily defined and measured in job descriptions, qualifications, the availability of soft skills is not easy to determine, so their assessment is often subjective. However, according to N. Dlugunovich, most employers consider them as important as professional knowledge and skills. The latter quickly become obsolete, while soft skills are always relevant. According to Bogdan O., based on research conducted in 16 countries in Europe, 93% of employers

consider soft skills more important qualities of employees than their professional skills (Bogdan, 2019).

The study showed that managers of foreign companies do not consider the level of development of young professionals and graduates in the private sector to be sufficient for work. In particular, the following characteristics of graduates are underdeveloped from the employer's point of view:

- ability to establish effective communication, effective listening, negotiation, emotional intelligence, etc.;
- ability to solve complex problems.

These results are confirmed by the survey of international HEIs managers in Ukraine, who identify critical thinking skills and the ability to generate new ideas as less developed among students.

The study of the degree of soft skills development as a result of the survey of students of language universities showed that soft skills are developed in them by 34-78%, on average by 54%.

The conducted research has proved that employers' attention and demand for specialists who have developed a high level of soft skills during their studies at the university is growing. At the same time, the lack of students' preparedness for this type of skill is noticeable. The results of the survey are confirmed by the data of the World Economic Forum on the need to develop soft skills in the world.

Thus, in the course of the study, the data were obtained, which can be used for the development of methodological support for the development of soft skills in universities and the selection of training areas of personal qualities of future professionals.

Conclusion. The study showed that in today's world, graduates' soft skills in the professional study of foreign languages is one of the main requirements of employers, requiring a review of educational programs to humanize higher education, including the verification of training programs in foreign languages.

For successful employment and effective life, foreign language specialists should have not only knowledge of subjects but also a powerful arsenal of soft skills, be ready for effective social interaction, a transition from one activity to another, self-improvement and lifelong learning, management of emotions, be able to withstand stress, anticipate and eliminate risks, think flexibly, creatively and critically, manage their time rationally, clearly define goals and ways to achieve them. Mastering soft skills and their constant development is the way to successful employment and strengthening of positions in the labor market.

To develop soft skills while studying a foreign language, it is reasonable to use interactive teaching methods, such as business games, design methods, situational learning, etc.

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