

Development of Future Foreign Language Teachers' Soft Skills by Means of ICT in Ukrainian Universities

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Abstract: The aims of this paper are to overview the main aspects of soft skills development by means of ICT in higher education Ukraine. The ways of future foreign language teachers' soft skills development are identified within the core and selective parts of the curriculum of Bachelor's level. The article discusses the essence of soft skills, their difference from hard skills and the main recent tendencies of their development by means of ICT in Ukrainian higher education. The idea of creating educational-professional hub and its programme aimed at future foreign language teachers' soft skills development is outlined.

1 INTRODUCTION

Significant changes in science, economics and society for the last two decades have influenced the development of the education sector, setting the objective of training employable professionals who are able to respond to today's challenges and adapt to various working conditions. Recently, in Ukrainian higher education the so-called soft skills and their importance for the employability of graduates are frequently discussed. According to the opinion polls, most employers prefer a candidate who has developed soft skills, while purely professional skills (hard skills) are of primary importance for only 20% of the employers (Mitchell, 2008). The reason for this is that having professional knowledge and skills (hard skills) is not enough to perform a wide range of professional tasks. A person must have the universal skills needed in any activity: the ability to think critically, find the necessary information, work in a team, be resistant to stress, rationally plan his or her time, etc.


The European Commission declared that "a large number of Europeans, particularly highly-qualified young people, work in jobs that do not match their talents and aspirations. At the same time, 40% of European employers report that they cannot find people with the right skills to grow and innovate" (ec.europa.eu, 2016). Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (EC, 2018)

was suggested as the way to help more people "acquire the core set of skills necessary to work and live in the 21st century with a special focus on promoting entrepreneurial and innovation-oriented mind-sets and skills" (ec.europa.eu, 2016). The issue is especially relevant to Ukrainian context as there are more and more employers focusing on European standards and requirements for employees' hard and soft skills.

In Ukraine, the first sociological investigation of digital skills demonstrated that 53% of Ukrainian population are below the average mark, 15.1% of them do not have any digital skills at all (Diia, 2019). Digital skills are soft skills for all except IT specialists; moreover they can help to develop a range of other soft skills.

Such skills will be useful not only in professional activities, but also in everyday life, and will help to better arrange the living space, solve various life issues as well as establish relationships with others. The study of the soft skills development has become increasingly popular among scientists. On the one hand, scientists and managers who are engaged in business research and looking for the ways to train competitive workers discuss the feasibility of soft skills development. On the other hand, the importance of soft skills development is considered not only as a significant advantage in the business sphere, but also in any other field, including education.

Any teacher must have his or her soft skills developed as they interact with various people every day: students, parents, colleagues. It is important for them

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to be able to build relationships with others, present themselves and their ideas, have leadership qualities. The teachers face unpredictable situations every day, so they are expected to act effectively both inside and outside the school. The ability to efficiently behave in both typical and critical situations is one of the characteristic features of the developed soft skills of a teacher (Konovalenko and Goncharova, 2018). New trends in education lead to changes and the search for new models of future teachers' training, which focuses on the student-centredness, forms the image of a new generation teacher, teacher-facilitator, colleague, educator, project manager, communicator, researcher, innovator. Without developed soft skills it will be impossible for a teacher to perform this role.

The most prominent feature of the modern educational process is the active involvement of ICT in the classroom, which is undoubtedly an extreme need of the information society. The continuing development of digital technologies provides teachers with unlimited opportunities for the implementing, development and use of new methods and technologies in the educational process, helping to improve it, adapt to new labour market requirements, and to make the process of acquiring knowledge by students more engaging and productive.

The use of ICT as one of the tools in the process of future foreign language teachers' soft skills development has not been revealed in the researches profoundly enough. There are a lot of research and scientific publications on the use of ICT in the process of learning foreign languages in higher educational institutions or secondary schools. Nevertheless, the use of ICT as a means of soft skills development has not been sufficiently studied, thus the topic of our research is relevant in the context of recent world events and challenges the system of higher education faces today.

The *aim* of the article is to review the experience of future foreign languages teachers' soft skills development and to outline the effective ways of their development by means of ICT in Ukrainian universities.

2 METHODS

The methodology of our investigation is presented with the standard procedure of action research as it is one of the most dynamic, flexible and effective ways of implementing new ideas in the education sphere.

According to Mertler (Mertler, 2018) we are following such stages:

- Identifying and limiting the topic

- Gathering information
- Reviewing the related literature
- Developing a research plan
- Implementing the plan and collecting the data
- Analysing the data
- Developing an action plan
- Sharing and communicating the results
- Reflecting on the research process.

This paper presents the beginning stage of the study and action research cycle. So, it reveals the topic relevance, discusses the world and Ukrainian experience within the issue, describes the research plan and the first data obtained.

This research describes the attempt to accumulate the recent experience of educational community to face the challenges of new educational environment, to elicit what students and university teachers felt and how they reacted to emerging factors, to synthesise and communicate issues to be solved, and thereby to stimulate implementing the best practices of soft skills development by means of ICT. We suggest expanding the lens of focus from individual effective practices of university teachers to common use and creating the new model of future foreign languages teachers' soft skills development in the process of their training in Ukrainian universities.

We are going to involve all categories of stakeholders into our research as it is necessary to know the needs of students, university teachers, university management, their future school students, school administration, parents and authorities responsible for education on national level. Thus, besides of literature review, practical experience study, we need qualitative and quantitative data as well as mixed methods to engage the stakeholders to eliciting and synthesising all relevant data and create the model of future foreign languages teachers' soft skills development by means of ICT.

In this article we reveal our experience of finding the answers to such research questions:

1. What is 'soft skills'?
2. How have they been changing and what influences their change?
3. Which soft skills are especially important for future foreign language teachers?
4. What are the best practices for the development of soft skills?
5. What issues have not been solved yet?
6. How can the use of ICT contribute to the development of soft skills?

The answers to these questions will help us to collect the necessary data and start designing the model of future foreign languages teachers' soft skills development by means of ICT relevant to Ukrainian higher education.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The concept of soft skills has become an integral part of the labour market in many areas of the economy, and there are some other closely related terms.

Cinque (Cinque, 2016), researching the development of skills which we call 'soft skills', provides a list of terms used by different organizations in different periods:

Life skills (WHO, 1993)
Transversal skills (ISFOL, 1998)
Generic competences (Tuning project, 2000)
Key competencies for a successful life and a well-functioning society (OECD, 2003; 2012)
Key competences for lifelong learning (UE, 2006)
21st century skills (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009)
Transferable skills (RPIC-VIP, 2011)
Future work skills (ITF, 2010)
Soft Skills for Talent (Manpower Group, 2014)
Skills for Social Progress (OECD, 2015)

Analysing these terms, we can see that they contain the words 'future', 'life', 'social', 'society', i.e. the presence of these skills is seen as a guarantee of the success in the life of a particular person, which leads to the success in society. And the verbs 'transversal' and 'transferable' indicate the universal nature of these skills, the ability to use them in various activities. The term 'soft skills for talent' emphasizes that the development of soft skills gives a person more opportunities to realize his or her natural abilities, and as a result increases success in the career life and promotes self-realization, which in turn is the key to harmonious and happy life.

The Oxford Dictionary defines 'soft skills' as "personal qualities of a person that contribute to successful communication with other people: the ability to work together, enthusiasm, emotional intelligence" (www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com, 2021). At the same time, life skills are defined as "skills necessary or extremely useful for managing daily life: the ability to work in a team, solve problems, literacy and arithmetic skills. They also include such vital skills as the ability to cook or use a washing machine" (www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com, 2021). Thus, although the terms 'soft skills' and 'life skills' are closely related, there is a difference between them.

The use of the term 'life skills' is more acceptable when we talk about the formation of skills necessary for a person primarily for independent living, adaptation to living conditions, solving life and everyday problems. While the concept of 'soft skills' is more often used in the context of training a person for future professional activities.

The concepts of soft skills and hard skills originated in the 1960s and 1970s in military affairs and were expressed in the doctrine of "Military Training Design Systems": hard skills were used to denote machine skills and soft skills – to work with people and papers. Subsequently, the terms began to be actively used in business. Robles (Robles, 2012) considered the need to develop soft skills in students as one of the important factors in preparing them for successful business communication. Mitchell (Mitchell, 2008) wrote about the importance of integrating soft skills into business school curricula, which would contribute to the further successful employment of students and their competitiveness in the labour market of the 21st century. There is a growing talk about the need to develop soft skills in any profession and emphasise the need to include the development of soft skills in educational programs as one of the mandatory components, along with training for specialised professional skills.

Thus, the modern education faces the necessity of training primarily teachers who have well-developed hard and soft skills, and who are able to contribute to the further effective development of these skills of their future students. That is why in the Regulations on Accreditation of Study Programmes in Higher Education, one of the important sub-criteria (sub-criterion 2.6) is the following: "The study programme envisages the development of soft skills in students that meet stated objectives" (NAQA, 2019), which will help graduates succeed in their workplace.

The ratio of soft skills and hard skills may differ for individual professions. There are professions that provide accurate calculations, drawings, experiments, and in these professions the hard skills are more important, because the level of their development mostly influences the result of the task fulfilled. Whereas the professions which are directly related to communication with people, planning, trade, art, require more focus on soft skills. However, it should be noted that, for example, researchers in a laboratory with advanced communication skills will have a better chance of professional growth, as they will be able to present themselves and their ideas better than their colleagues, whose soft skills are less developed.

When compared with the hard skills, the soft skills are based more on personal values and in response

to certain actions the models of human behaviour are engaged. The development of soft skills is slower and reaching a certain level is not guaranteed. Soft skills under certain conditions have a tendency to reverse development, while hard skills have almost no such tendency (Dlugunovych, 2014).

There are many universal skills that may be needed in a profession and for life in general. A study by Simona (Simona, 2015) among teachers in the UK, Denmark, Spain, Romania and Portugal identified such life skills as:

- Numeracy skills
- Literacy and communication
- ICT skills
- Interpersonal skills
- Use of foreign languages
- Entrepreneurship
- Job seeking
- Learning to learn

Most of these life skills can be attributed to soft skills. Among the proposed list, teachers had to choose the most important in their opinion. The study found that the most desirable skills to be included in school curricula were: literacy and communication for Danish, British, Romanian and Spanish teachers, ICT skills for Portuguese and Romanian respondents, interpersonal skills for British respondents, learning to learn for Danish Spanish and Portuguese teachers, use of foreign languages for Danish respondents. The most acceptable means to implement the involvement of these flexible skills in the curriculum, according to the author, are the method of case-study and role-playing games (Simona, 2015).

The World Economic Forum in 2015 highlighted the 10 most important qualities needed in 2020 for successful employment, the so-called Davos concepts (Lazorenko and Krasnenko, 2019):

1. Complex problem solving
2. Critical thinking
3. Creativity
4. People management
5. Coordinating with others
6. Emotional intelligence
7. Judgement and decision making
8. Service orientation
9. Negotiation
10. Cognitive flexibility

This list has been transformed to a shorter one, so there are four competences on it now (Lazorenko and Krasnenko, 2019):

1. Critical thinking
2. Communication
3. Creativity
4. Collaboration

Each profession requires greater development of certain soft skills. Thus, in the typical program “Methodology of teaching English” for future teachers of English, the need to create opportunities for the development of essential life skills (which corresponds to our understanding of soft skills) that transcend subject boundaries, is emphasised. According to the programme, these important skills include (Bevz et al., 2009):

1. Communication
2. Collaboration
3. Creativity
4. Critical thinking
5. Information literacy
6. Intercultural awareness
7. Problem-solving
8. Time management

As skills are different, approaches, methods and tools for their development will be different. So that the teacher could work effectively with students and help them develop the above mentioned skills, he must plan the expected results and the program of action that will help students to develop the appropriate soft skills. The use of ICT in the educational process will greatly facilitate the formation of soft skills, and at the same time students’ awareness of higher education latest trends will be greatly enhanced with digital and ICT literacy. Kuybida et al. (Kuybida et al., 2019) states that the development of digital skills is one of the conditions for developing the digital market of any country, a necessary condition for successful cooperation and interaction in ‘innovation ecosystems’.

Nowadays ICT play a crucial role in future foreign language teachers’ soft skills development. In our research we will use such understanding of ICT – “a set of methods, production processes, software and hardware, integrated for collecting, processing, storing, transmission, demonstrating and the use of data in the interests of their users” (Shvachich et al., 2017). The notion of ICTs will be considered not only as hardware and software, but also as the more advanced scheme of (Shvachich et al., 2017):

1. Theoretical principles (concepts and laws of computer science).
2. Methods of solving problems (modeling, system analysis, system design, methods of transmission, collection, production, accumulation, storage, processing, transmission and protection of information).
3. Means for achieving tasks:
 - hardware (personal computer and its components; local and global networks, modern peripheral equipment);
 - software (system, applied, universal, special, instrumental).

Nowadays ICTs are widely used in the educational process and in many cases due to the use of ICT it has become possible to create virtual universities that do not require students to stay in the classroom, but allow them to adjust their curriculum, study outside the city or country. This surely provides more opportunities to implement a lifelong learning strategy in order to enrich people's knowledge, improve skills and abilities necessary for effective adaptation to new professional and living conditions.

The use of ICT also promotes the implementation of interactive learning within the system "teacher – computer – student" and helps primarily to develop communication skills, the ability to establish emotional contact. Interactivity is a key feature of ICT in the learning process, it contributes greatly to the implementation of other didactic qualities of ICT, such as communication, adaptability, productivity and creativity (Gurevich et al., 2012).

Thus, we see that the basic didactic qualities of ICT coincide with the basic soft skills that a person must develop to be successful in today's world.

In the educational process, ICT can act as a subject of study, as a learning tools, as a means of managing the educational process, and as a tool for managing research and scientific and methodological work (Gurevich et al., 2012). Speaking about the process of learning foreign languages and preparing for future teaching activities in the context of developing students' soft skills, ICT would be considered a learning tool, a means for managing the learning process, research and methodological work.

The pandemic of 2020 promoted the massive use of virtual classrooms and video conferencing software. They are often used now as a tools for organization classes while distance learning. Such programmes and platforms as Zoom, Google Meet, Panopto, Microsoft Teams are useful helpers for every teacher. In the context of soft skills development it is worth to mention that all of them contribute to

communication skills development as well as to team-building development. Being at a distance from each other, students have a possibility to continue communication and collaboration. Teachers can use these tools to split students into groups (break-out rooms), ask them to write messages in the chat (e.g. in pairs), share a screen, video, audio or files etc. The use of software for videoconferences facilitates future teachers' new understanding of classroom management in terms of making digital classroom as close to a physical one as it is possible.

The ICT as a learning tool stands for various software, platforms, Internet sources used while learning foreign languages and obtaining competences needed for future teachers. One of the most useful foreign languages learning tools are social services in the Internet, for example, social nets, blogs, mind maps, imitators of 3D space, which are called Web 2.0 technology (Kazhan et al., 2020). All these tools allow students to communicate with native speakers of foreign languages, representatives of different cultures and nationalities, that is much more useful for learning and more effective than the study of this material with the help of coursebooks. It also promotes the development of such students' soft skills as communication skills, collaborating, negotiations, emotional intelligence, intercultural awareness and others.

Mind maps or virtual boards are a good tool to develop critical, systemic and creative thinking as well as communication skills and team-building. The term 'mind map' was proposed by Tony Buzan in 1970s and later in 2007 the first program (MindMeister) for creating visualized schemes was made (Ivanova et al., 2020). At modern stage of ICT development there is a big variety of such programmes. The most popular ones are MindMeister, Padlet, Jamboard, Miro, Cooogle, Xmind, BubblUs, MindMup, Canva. These programmes can be used as auxiliary means for brainstorming to share thoughts and ideas online. Brainstorming is one of the most effective methods for critical and creative thinking development. Mind maps can also be used for creating notes while lectures and conferences as well as for planning that can greatly contribute to the development of time management skills.

For the visualization of information, graphic recording is used. Such new techniques of processing and presentation of information as scribing and sketch-noting can became a good alternative to usual notes in paper notebooks or presentation. To make a video with the help of scribing or to write a lecture with the help of sketch-noting one should analyse and choose the most important facts among the variety of information proposed by a lecturer or books

and media. The future teachers should reconceptualise everything and present in the most appropriate way. All these activities train their thinking making it more creative and critical as well as training their ability to solve complex problems. Among programmes that can be used for scribing there are PowToon, GoAnimate, Sparkol Videoscribe, Animaker, apps used for sketch-noting are Paper by Fifty Three, Explain Everything, Sketchbook Express, Notability. These types of visualization are especially valuable for students participating in project-based multimedia learning.

In the context of both hard and soft skills development CLIL method will be also relevant as joint learning foreign languages and computer science has a high potential for enhancing employable teacher training (Merzlykin et al., 2018).

While considering ICT to be the means of achieving our research purposes, we studied the current situation of students' digital skills development. There are the survey results realised by a team of researchers from Bogdan Khmelnytsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University, Kherson State Maritime Academy and Dmytro Motornyi Tavria State Agrotechnological University. According to it "most of the students (40.6%) who participated in the survey would like to study using the mixed learning technology (combining online, traditional technologies and self-study), 20.8% of the students prefer studying traditionally (lectures and practical lessons in the classroom), 13.9% of the students would like to study in groups (to get the project task and work on the result), 9.9% of the students would like to study on an individual schedule, 8/9% of the students would like to study distantly, 5.9% of the students have pointed out that there is no matter what technology is used" (Voloshinov et al., 2020). The investigation took place before the pandemic. Now we know that both students and teachers faced a lot of challenges mostly associated with the lack of digital skills.

We conducted a survey among teachers and students of Bogdan Khmelnytsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University in order to learn the level of awareness of methods for soft skills development and to identify the most important skills. 10 teachers and 53 students took part in the survey. The survey was conducted by means of Google Forms. Two questionnaires with similar questions were proposed to each group.

1. Do you know what soft skills are?
2. How can you define soft skills?
3. What skills from the suggested list are important in today's professional and everyday life? (several possible answers). If necessary, add to the list.

- (a) Complex Problem Solving
- (b) Critical Thinking
- (c) Creativity
- (d) People Management
- (e) Coordinating with Others
- (f) Emotional Intelligence
- (g) Judgment and Decision making
- (h) Service Orientation
- (i) Negotiation
- (j) Cognitive Flexibility

4. What skills from the suggested list are important for a future foreign language teacher? (several possible answers). If necessary, add to the list. (The same list)
5. Have you attended trainings, seminars, webinars, which cover the topic of soft skills development?
6. What methods, techniques would you like the teachers use in the classroom to improve your soft skills? (a question for students) / What methods, techniques do you use in the classroom to develop students' soft skills? (a question for teachers)
7. What ICT would help you to improve your soft skills? (a question for students) / What ICT do you use in the classroom in order to develop students' soft skills? (a question for teachers).

The study revealed that 90% of teachers have an idea of what soft skills are, among students the figure was lower, only 47.8% answered that they know exactly what soft skills are.

Among the skills a person needs in everyday life, most teachers chose Critical Thinking (100% of respondents) and Cognitive Flexibility (80%), as well as Coordinating with Others (80%), Judgment and Decision making (70%) and Complex Problem Solving (70%).

Coordinating with Others (84.9%) was in the first place for students. Other important features in the opinion of students are Judgment and Decision making (83%) and Creativity (77.4%).

In the questions about the skills necessary for a future foreign language teacher, Creativity (90%) and Coordinating with Others (90%) are preferable from the point of view of teachers. Critical Thinking (80%) and Cognitive Flexibility are also considered by teachers to be important qualities for future teachers.

Almost similar results on this issue were obtained in a survey of students: they consider Coordinating with Others (86.8%) and Creativity (86.8%) the most useful skills for future teachers, as well as Cognitive Flexibility (69.8%) and Negotiation (52.8%).

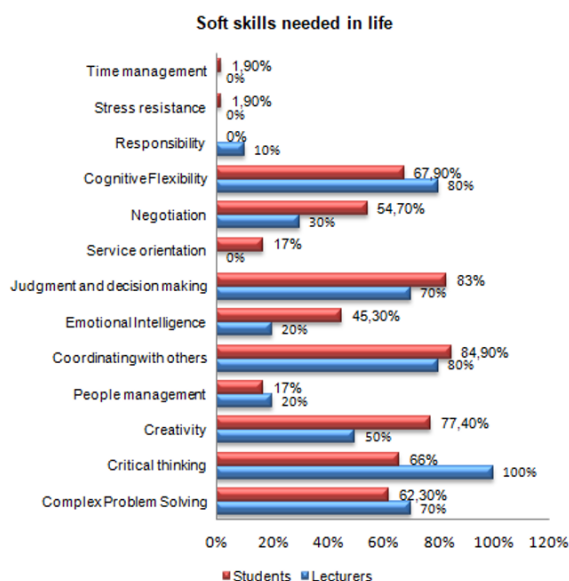


Figure 1: Students' and lecturers' attitude to soft skills needed in life.

The survey also revealed that only 40% of teachers and 17.8% of students attended trainings, seminars, webinars dedicated to the soft skills development.

Teachers demonstrated greater awareness of the methods and techniques used to develop soft skills (group work, project technology, problem-based learning, role playing game, business game, discussion, interactive communication, micro-teaching, work in variable groups). As for students, most respondents did not have a clear idea of the methods that can enhance the soft skills development. Only a few students were able to answer clearly (group work, business games, creative tasks, research projects, trainings, interactive games and technologies). However, almost all respondents mentioned methods and techniques related to creativity and active interaction between people. Some students expressed their wish to develop time management and public speaking as rather important skills.

Among ICT assisted methods and techniques used by teachers in class to develop soft skills, there are web quests, E-learning, Google Forms, Google Docs, Jamboard, audio and video materials, case method, review and analysis of Internet pages on the problem, computer testing, multimedia equipment, e-mailing, social networking, TED talks. There were some other items mentioned though they can be called neither methods nor techniques.

Many students found it difficult to answer this question. Some of them mentioned artificial intelligence, various messengers, social networks, video conferencing, viewing of developing content, information portals, mobile applications, media broad-

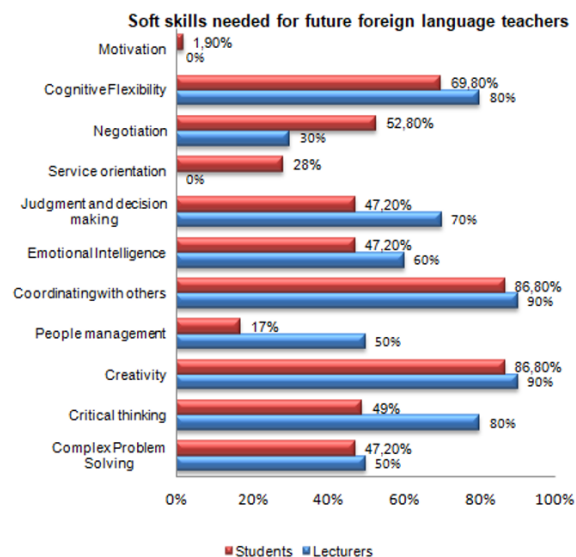


Figure 2: Students' and lecturers' attitude to soft skills needed in professional activity.

casts, webinars, trainings, interactive quests.

Thus, having analysed the survey data, we can conclude that both teachers and students have almost the same idea of future foreign language teacher's soft skills. Both groups of respondents replied that the focus should be made on the development of creative thinking, creativity and the ability to cooperate with others. However, we observed a lack of awareness and understanding among students about methods, techniques and tools to be used in the process of soft skills development. Thus, it is necessary to pay more attention to this issue in the educational process and to integrate soft skills development in educational programmes content and aims.

On the basis of information collected by us and mentioned above with the further study of the topic, we plan to develop a model for soft skills development of future foreign language teachers, which will be mostly associated with the use of modern ICT. It is planned to implement the developed model into the educational process of applicants for higher education of Bogdan Khmelnytsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University, who study in the specialty 014.021 Secondary education (English language and literature) and check its effectiveness.

Now on our list of soft skills to primarily develop are those offered in the typical program "Methodology of teaching English" for Bachelor's degree (Bevz et al., 2009): communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, information and digital literacy, intercultural awareness, problem-solving, time management. Step-by-step, we are going to add other soft skills to this list as modern reality is extremely dy-

namic and requires flexibility and quick reaction to everyday challenges in education.

Among methods and technologies to be used first and foremost are the following:

1. Problem-based learning
2. Case-study method
3. Interactive learning technologies
4. Game technologies
5. Blended learning technologies and m-learning technology

In the process of implementing the soft skills development model, we will focus on classroom and distance learning within the curriculum of the study programme. Besides of activities in physical or virtual classes there will be special focus on students' self-study dealing with their learner autonomy and other skills. One more component of our model will be linked to students' extracurricular activity. For these purposes the list of recommended ICT tools will be created to support students.

Our research plan comprises the idea of creation an educational centre or a hub which will be a territory for cooperation, collaboration and sharing experience, a place for discussing issues related to methodology of teaching foreign languages and various issues related to the educational process, current trends in education, of the national and world level, small-scale and large-scale investigations. It is possible to involve not only students and teachers of Bogdan Khmelnytsky Melitopol State Pedagogical University, but also stakeholders: school teachers, methodologists, various educational and cultural organizations representatives. Other universities, schools and colleges can also be involved in the cooperation.

By participating in the educational hub, students will be able to develop such soft skills as communication skills, skills of cooperation and critical thinking, to expand their intercultural and international awareness. Participation in seminars, trainings, etc. will allow students to prepare for future professional activities and expand their understanding of modern professional requirements, combine their learning and research. A special sequence of workshops with ICT assisted professional development activities will be delivered, so that future teachers could handle with their soft skills at present and be ready for that in future.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The process of training foreign language teachers for professional activity, equipping them with hard skills

cannot and should not be limited to the development of professional skills and abilities, it is also necessary to develop universal skills that will help them be more competitive in the labour market and more effective organise their professional activity. In the modern system of higher education in Ukraine, although there appear researches of the need to focus on the methods and ways to develop soft skills of representatives of various branches, but there are no effective programmes of action or models of implementing this idea. So the issue remains relevant and needs further consideration. We hope that the working out and implementation of the model of future foreign language teachers' soft skills development will be effective and help students feel more confident when starting their professional career.

There are still a lot of issues waiting for further study and finding solutions. For future employees in any branch the framework of their professional training should contain not only hard skills and competences but also be focused on creating the opportunities for their soft skills development. The list of soft skills for each job should be compiled, the recommendations of the possible ways for their development should be produced.

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