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Beyond language proficiency: integrating soft skills into Business English teaching

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ABSTRACT

Teaching Business English extends beyond mastering vocabulary and grammar; it equips learners with the skills to communicate effectively in professional environments. In business world, soft skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and negotiation are equally important as linguistic proficiency. This article examines effective methodologies for integrating soft skills into Business English teaching by reviewing relevant literature and case studies published between 2019 and 2024. The findings highlight the urgency of incorporating soft skills into the curriculum to enhance learners' ability to navigate real-world business contexts. Several practical methodologies, such as project-based learning, role-playing, and case study analysis, are recommended to support this integration. This discussion provides valuable insights for curriculum designers, educators, and learners, helping them optimize their roles in fostering comprehensive Business English education.

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1. Introduction

In today's business world, proficiency in Business English is essential for professionals to communicate effectively. However, mastering the language alone is insufficient to ensure success in the competitive business landscape. Business professionals must combine linguistic knowledge with various soft skills to excel. Cardon et al. (2024) emphasize that while Artificial Intelligence can support language production for activities like brainstorming and reporting, it cannot replicate essential soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and emotional intelligence. This highlights the critical need to foster soft skills among business graduates to prepare them for real-world challenges.

Building on this need, learners themselves are increasingly aware of the importance of soft skills development. Research by Kanuka and Gregory (2024) indicates that students recognize employabil-

ity skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, flexibility, and creativity as essential for their professional success. These skills enable learners to engage in interactive communication and foster positive collaboration, even in cross-cultural contexts. This aligns with the demands of the 21st-century workplace, where employees are expected to possess a diverse skill set, including critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and social aptitude, alongside linguistic proficiency (Soproni, 2023).

Despite their recognized importance, traditional language education programs often neglect soft skills. Business English courses tend to prioritize technical language skills such as grammar, vocabulary, and writing accuracy. However, Horea and Abrudan (2022) argue that focusing solely on linguistic accuracy is an outdated approach from two decades ago. To remain relevant and valuable in today's workforce, learners must develop comprehensive language competence that integrates both linguistic proficiency and soft skills like communication, cultural awareness, problem-solving, and teamwork. Therefore, an effective Business English curriculum must go beyond the basics of grammar and vocabulary, adopting a holistic approach to equip learners with the critical soft skills demanded by modern employers.

Building on this need for a holistic approach, recent years have seen educators and researchers advocating for an integrated methodology in Business English education that combines language instruction with soft skills development. Studies by Ruminar (2024) and Khan et al. (2021) demonstrate the effectiveness of this integration in producing well-prepared, professional graduates. This approach acknowledges that successful communication in business relies not only on linguistic accuracy but also on the ability to build relationships, manage conflicts, and engage in collaborative problem-solving. Despite these advancements, there remains a gap in research on how soft skills can be effectively incorporated into Business English curricula, signaling an urgent need for further investigation. This approach aligns with previous research, such as Herbert & Herbert (2020), who formulated five principles for integrating soft skills into ICT curricula, and Khan et al. (2021), who examined the significance of such integration to identify potential challenges and solutions. Building on these foundations, the present study aims to provide a comprehensive framework for integrating soft skills into Business English education.

Therefore, this study addresses the identified gap by exploring effective ways to integrate soft skills into Business English education. The findings are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, the study can enhance the research and development of Business English teaching methodologies. Practically, it offers actionable insights for teachers, curriculum designers, and learners.

The study provides guidance on three key aspects for curriculum designers. First, it emphasizes the importance of understanding the goals of integrating soft skills, enabling the formulation of materials that align with targeted outcomes. Additionally, it draws from case studies to identify which soft skills are most relevant and how they can be effectively incorporated into Business English instruction. Lastly, the study addresses the need for clear assessment strategies that evaluate both linguistic proficiency and soft skills, ensuring a comprehensive approach to curriculum design.

By addressing these areas, curriculum designers can create a well-rounded curriculum that meets the demands of modern business contexts. As the primary implementers, teachers benefit from clear

guidelines supporting their instructional practices. Learners, in turn, gain increased motivation and practical strategies as an informed curriculum enhances their classroom experience and equips them with the skills needed to succeed in professional environments.

2. Method

The current study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the integration of soft skills into Business English teaching. A comprehensive review of existing literature was conducted, complemented by case studies that explored practical applications of soft skills integration in Business English instruction. The literature selection focused on articles published within the last five years (2019–2024) using keywords such as “soft skills,” “integration,” “business teaching,” and “English.” Similar variations of these keywords were also employed to ensure a broad and inclusive search, following the approach suggested by Ýpek et al. (2023). The methodology followed the sequential phases outlined by Hamma and Hajar Larekeng (2024): (1) selecting relevant publications, (2) compiling preliminary information, (3) identifying connected themes, (4) incorporating relevant data, and (5) drawing conclusions. After gathering the relevant articles, a systematic screening process was undertaken. This involved scanning the content to extract data by identifying key themes, methodologies, and findings from the selected studies.

The extracted data were then analyzed to identify interrelated themes, which were synthesized to provide a cohesive understanding of the subject. Additional relevant information was incorporated to enrich the analysis. Finally, conclusions were drawn summarizing the essential findings and insights regarding integrating soft skills into Business English teaching. This method ensures a thorough exploration of the topic, offering valuable contributions to the field of Business English education.

3. Discussion

3.1. Rationale for integration

The urgency for equipping graduates with soft skills to excel in professional workplaces has become a critical concern. While learners may possess strong hard skills, these abilities hold little value if they cannot effectively communicate their progress, ideas, or products to clients and colleagues (Wu et al., 2023). A robust vocabulary or mastery of grammar alone does not make a professional communicative. Instead, professionals need to know how and when to use these linguistic tools in a way that aligns with contextual, cultural, and interpersonal nuances. Research by Spivak (2024) highlights the impact of soft skills—such as adaptability, problem-solving, and communication—on employees’ professional performance in the State Penitentiary Service of Ukraine. Spivak’s findings show that better-developed soft skills lead to stronger teamwork, smoother collaboration, and greater success in achieving project goals.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of soft skills, conventional Business English teaching remains largely focused on improving learners’ linguistic competence. Traditionally, these courses are designed to enhance vocabulary, grammar, and business-specific idioms. While these are essential components, they alone are insufficient for preparing learners to thrive in complex profes-

sional environments. As noted by Sofyan (2019), some students mistakenly perceive Business English classes as mere extensions of general English lessons, expecting them to be engaging and filled with entertaining exercises centered on idiomatic expressions. However, this limited view undermines the broader objectives of Business English education, which should aim to prepare learners with strategies and competencies for effective communication in real-world business contexts.

Recognizing this gap, scholars have increasingly advocated for integrating soft skills into Business English curricula. Rashid & Kankaanranta (2023) propose a model of teaching English for general business purposes in Bangladesh that combines theoretical and practical learning, both in the classroom and workplace. Such an approach emphasizes the importance of authentic learning experiences, including soft skills training, to develop well-rounded, communicative professionals. This aligns with the concept of task-based and project-based learning, where learners practice applying their language and interpersonal skills in simulated or real-world scenarios.

Moreover, the demands of international business communication necessitate a shift in educational practices. Permatasari et al. (2023) argue that merely teaching the language for communication is no longer sufficient; instructors must integrate relevant soft skills into Business English education. These include teamwork, adaptability, negotiation, and cultural awareness, which are essential for navigating global business environments. The integration of such skills prepares learners for workplace challenges and addresses the increasing demand from employers for employees who can seamlessly combine technical knowledge with interpersonal competencies.

As education moves towards a more holistic model, the shift from traditional academic learning to a balanced integration of soft skills development reflects broader trends in pedagogy. This paradigm recognizes the need to prepare learners to use the language effectively and navigate complex professional interactions confidently. By adopting this integrated approach, Business English teaching can provide learners with the tools they need to become adaptable, communicative, and successful professionals in today's globalized business world.

3.2. Benefits of integration

Integrating soft skills into Business English teaching significantly enhances learners' ability to communicate effectively in domestic and international workplace contexts. Soft skills such as adaptability and flexibility allow learners to perform at their best in diverse environments, including workplaces with varied cultural settings. These skills are especially valuable in today's globalized world, where employees often interact with colleagues, clients, and stakeholders from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

In speaking activity, for instance, learners are trained to communicate fluently and persuasively in meetings, negotiations, presentations, and teleconferences. These scenarios require linguistic competence, confidence, clarity, and an understanding of audience dynamics. Listening skills are equally important, enabling learners to comprehend and interpret the perspectives of clients, colleagues, and stakeholders accurately. Proficiency in writing is another critical aspect, as learners need to master the conventions of creating business documents such as reports, emails, proposals, and contracts. As noted by Guellil (2020), Business English education must extend beyond the mechanical aspects of

language to include the development of cultural awareness, professional etiquette, and industry-specific terminology, which are vital for effective workplace communication.

Moreover, the integration of soft skills helps learners navigate cross-cultural differences. Bovée and Thill (2021) emphasize the importance of cultural competence in fostering mutual understanding, avoiding potential misunderstandings, and establishing positive professional relationships. Cultural competence allows learners to adapt their communication style to suit different cultural contexts, making them more effective collaborators and negotiators. This ability is critical in avoiding conflicts and resolving disputes amicably, which are essential skills for building trust and sustaining professional relationships.

Another key benefit of integrating soft skills is the enhancement of decision-making and conflict-resolution abilities. Learners trained in soft skills such as critical thinking, empathy, and problem-solving are better equipped to analyze situations, weigh options, and make informed decisions in high-pressure environments. Additionally, they can approach conflicts constructively, employing negotiation and mediation strategies to resolve issues effectively. These capabilities not only make learners more professional but also contribute to fostering a collaborative and harmonious workplace environment.

By incorporating soft skills into the teaching of specific language skills—such as speaking, listening, and writing—Business English learners can develop a holistic skill set that aligns with the demands of modern workplaces. They gain the ability to communicate with precision and cultural sensitivity, build strong professional relationships, and confidently address challenges. This integrated approach ensures that learners are not just proficient in language but also prepared to succeed in a competitive and interconnected business world.

3.3. Alignment with 21st-century workplace demands

In the competitive landscape of the 21st-century workplace, knowledge and hard skills alone are insufficient to ensure professional success. Employers across various regions continue to report a lack of problem-solving skills among candidates, highlighting a critical gap in workforce readiness (Andrievskikh & Lapina, 2021). Modern industries require professionals who not only possess technical expertise but also demonstrate employability skills, including communication, leadership, analytical thinking, management, interpersonal abilities, critical thinking, entrepreneurship, and teamwork (Soproni, 2023).

Ngo (2024) underscores that these soft skills are indispensable not only for personal growth and social engagement but also for thriving in professional environments. Employers value employees who can adapt to diverse teams, communicate effectively with colleagues, and address challenges in complex, dynamic settings. Consequently, equipping graduates with these soft skills has become a fundamental aspect of education to ensure they are well-prepared for future workplace demands.

Educational institutions are increasingly integrating soft skills training into their curricula to meet these demands. This approach aligns with the evolving expectations of employers and fosters graduates who are not only knowledgeable but also equipped to contribute meaningfully to organizational goals. By focusing on soft skills development alongside traditional academic learning, institu-

tions can better prepare learners to excel in diverse professional roles and adapt to the complexities of the modern workplace.

3.4. *Soft skills to integrate*

To achieve the desired outcomes in Business English teaching, the selection of soft skills for integration must be targeted and relevant to workplace demands. Khan et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of communication and teamwork skills, finding these to be particularly significant in the context of General Indian English classes. Communication skills enable learners to apply English effectively in business scenarios by equipping them with strategies to convey their ideas clearly and persuasively. Simultaneously, teamwork skills prepare learners to collaborate efficiently in group settings, a core requirement in many professional environments.

Beyond communication and teamwork, integrating social skills is critical for fostering positive interpersonal relationships in the workplace. Acknowledging this, Ulfa and Rosidin (2024) developed an assessment instrument specifically designed to measure social skills, reflecting their importance in the teaching process. Social skills like empathy, adaptability, and cultural sensitivity are essential for navigating diverse workplace interactions and building cohesive professional relationships.

Critical thinking is another vital soft skill to integrate into Business English teaching. Zhong (2024) highlights its importance in enhancing learners' competence in business contexts. Critical thinking enables learners to analyze situations, evaluate options, and make informed decisions, particularly valuable skills in negotiations and strategic planning. By fostering a critical mindset, educators can help learners approach business challenges confidently and creatively, ultimately improving their communication effectiveness.

Integrating these soft skills into Business English curricula ensures a comprehensive approach to language education that aligns with real-world professional requirements. Learners acquire linguistic proficiency and develop the interpersonal and cognitive competencies necessary to thrive in the global business arena. This targeted integration prepares them to meet the demands of the modern workplace while fostering their personal and professional growth.

3.5. *The integration method*

The integration of soft skills in Business English teaching is debatable. Maulana (2023) found that implementing soft skill development in this business school uses a stand-alone approach rather than an embedded method. Instead of being integrated into the existing courses, Maulana (2023) suggests that soft skills are ideally taught in a separate course, namely Self Development Course, Team Development Course, Community Development Course, and Internship Program. Meanwhile, Liu (2022) found that integrating soft skills in contextual Business English teaching is the most effective method to cultivate intercultural communication skills. By incorporating an intercultural approach, Business English teachers can assist learners in enhancing their intercultural awareness, improving their language skills, and effectively managing their behaviors. One effective strategy for fostering intercultural awareness in the classroom is to present learners with real-life scenarios or situations

they are likely to encounter in the workplace (Farani & Yustisia, 2021). It attracts students' enjoyment, cultivates their communication skills, enhances their understanding of business etiquette, and improves their ability to conduct business conversations.

Basically, soft skills are best learned in a practical situation. Yao & Tulliao (2019) suggested that classroom-based practices are best to provide learners the opportunity to enhance soft skills contributing to employability, such as skills related to independent work, interpersonal relationships, and the ability to work in global contexts. By experiencing things, learners are able to practice skills in authentic settings, reflect on their experiences, and receive feedback from peers and instructors. Thus, the more meaningful their practices, the more optimum the skills they gain (Roshid & Kankaanranta, 2023).

Gaining the best outcome from a meaningful practice is also the principle in Business English teaching. Banerjee & Roy (2021) proposed learner-centered method as the ideal way to improve learners' business English competence. The more learning experiences the learners have, the more competence they gain. Learning experiences can be designed in task-based learning. Xie (2022) found that using a task-based approach in business English courses effectively improves learner's autonomy and business knowledge. By applying several tasks such as role play on negotiation, business meeting simulation, and practice on writing reports, learners will gain more understanding as they experience it by themselves. Logically, this approach helps learners apply language skills in realistic situations, enhancing both fluency and confidence. Learning from realistic tasks has enabled learners to improve their critical thinking skills too (Zhong, 2024).

Besides having task-based approach, problem-based learning also can be an alternative to create a meaningful practice in the Business English classrooms that targets the learners to gain effective soft skills enhancement. Xie (2022) and Ulfa & Rosidin (2024) strongly support problem-based learning with clear stages on its assessment to facilitate learners who want to hone their soft skills in Business English class. By having a clear assessment as the follow-up of the learning, learners can measure their progress and reflect on what they should improve. This surely needs the teachers' feedback.

Another learning method highlighting collaboration practice is project-based learning. (Hartati et al., 2022) proposed project-based learning model as the method to hone the soft skills of vocational school learners, significantly influencing the learners' communication skills, discipline, responsibility, creativity, and collaboration. It makes sense as in project-based learning, learners work on a project over an extended period, which involves collaboration, critical thinking, and problem-solving, allowing learners to take ownership of their learning. Mercedes & Ramírez (2021) also found the effectiveness of this project-based learning and suggest to combine it with flipped learning to facilitate learners with various learning settings for gaining adaptability skills. Meanwhile, collaborative learning can also be an alternative (Suryaningsih, 2021). In this learning method, learners are supposed to collaborate to accomplish several tasks assigned. This surely leads the learners to practice their communication skills, adapt among members, and learn to manage roles to be responsible for their own tasks and teams.

In fact, this integration can be supported by technology that embraces collaboration, such as online platforms, simulations, and virtual collaborative tools, which have become valuable in foster-

ing communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills. Herbert & Herbert (2020) mentioned the effectiveness of technology, particularly in the context of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), can play a role in enhancing both technical and soft skills as the first principle in integrating soft skills into education, such as how digital tools like video conferencing and collaborative software enable learners to engage in real-time communication and collaboration with peers from different backgrounds, providing a global perspective on teamwork and leadership. Vo (2022) also perceives the effectiveness of technology in the form of online simulated workplace tasks to enhance business English learning.

3.6. Challenges in integrating soft skills

Despite the growing emphasis on soft skills in education, several challenges are found in teaching and assessing soft skills. The difficulty in measuring soft skills development is one of the challenges. Soft skills are subjective and context-dependent, unlike technical skills, which can often be assessed through standardized tests or practical exams. Soft skills are about the ability owned by a person to deal with others and to deal with himself in daily performance. Therefore, Suratno & Hutabarat (2023) perceive that assessments such as peer evaluations, self-reflection, and performance-based assessments are valid for capturing the growth of soft skills. Having the same concern, Ulfa & Rosidin (2024) designed an instrument for soft skill assessment in problem-based learning to improve learners' collaboration, communication, and social skills.

Besides the assessment issue, incorporating soft skills into Business English teaching is also challenging, as teachers should balance teaching language and soft skills with time constraints. Sometimes, accuracy in producing a correct expression is the bigger concern than coping with business partners from diverse cultural backgrounds. Thus, Maulana (2023) offers a separate program for enhancing soft skills in a curriculum. It becomes a controversial issue that leads the curriculum developer into a dilemma. Diachkova et al. (2021) also see the dilemma and suggest Business English teachers bring materials based on global issues into the teaching process so learners can get insight from the practical experience and absorb the positive to develop their professional skills and global competence.

4. Conclusion and Suggestions

Reviewing several research and case studies concerning the integration of soft skills into English for a Specific Purpose, namely Business English teaching, reveals several highlights. First, due to the 21st century work demand, soft skills development should be integrated into business English teaching to prepare and build competent business professionals effectively. Soft skills such as communication, teamwork, social skills, and critical thinking are highly recommended to be integrated as those skills are needed for business enthusiasts to build interactive communication and positive collaboration among cross-cultural challenges. By incorporating soft skills into Business English teaching, educators can prepare learners to excel in real-world business environments, ensuring they possess linguistic proficiency and the practical skills required for professional success.

To achieve this integration effectively, a combination of strategies is recommended. Practical collaborative approaches such as task-based and problem-based learning allow learners to experience

realistic scenarios, enhancing their autonomy and critical thinking through hands-on tasks like business simulations and collaborative projects. Project-based learning and technology-enhanced methods further allow learners to develop teamwork, creativity, and adaptability. Additionally, clear assessment mechanisms, such as peer evaluations and performance-based evaluations, are vital for measuring soft skills development. Innovative tools, including online platforms and virtual collaborative technologies, support these practices, offering diverse and engaging learning experiences. A balanced approach, blending standalone courses with embedded soft skill practices within Business English curricula, is key to fostering well-rounded, competent professionals.

In short, collaboration supported by technology is the highlight of the integration process. Experts such as teachers and practitioners should help to give feedback and assess the learners' progress. Unfortunately, this study is not yet contextualized to a specific setting as the literature sources were compiled from different settings. Future research concerning integrating soft skills in Business English teaching in the Indonesian context would gain more practical benefits. Curriculum developers, teachers and learners may get insight into Business English's targeted goals. Thus, the goals planned can be achieved.

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