
RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Attitudes and Perceptions of Moroccan EFL Learners toward Soft Skills Modules: A Qualitative Study at Mohammed V University

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the attitudes and perceptions of Moroccan English Studies students at Mohammed V University toward the integration of soft skills modules in their curriculum. Through questionnaire-based interviews with 11 students, the research identifies mixed perceptions of the modules' usefulness, a strong desire for practical application, recognition of key skills gained, and a gap between theory and practice. While students value skills like communication and teamwork, they criticize the lack of experiential learning. The findings highlight the need for curriculum reforms to incorporate more hands-on training, bridging the gap between academic learning and real-world application. This study contributes to the discourse on soft skills education in higher education and offers implications for pedagogical practices in Morocco and beyond.

KEYWORDS

Curriculum Integration, Employability, English Studies, Experiential Learning, Higher Education, Moroccan EFL Learners, Perceptions, Practical Application, Qualitative Study, Soft Skills.

1. Introduction

The growing emphasis on soft skills in higher education reflects their critical role in enhancing employability and career success. In Morocco, educational reforms like the Strategic Vision 2015-2030 underscore the need to integrate soft skills into curricula. However, despite this growing emphasis, there remains a notable gap in understanding how students perceive the effectiveness of soft skills training, particularly within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the attitudes and perceptions of Moroccan English Studies students at Mohammed V University toward the soft skills modules integrated into their curriculum. The study is guided by two primary questions: (1) What are the attitudes of Moroccan English Studies students toward the soft skills modules in their curriculum? and (2) How do these students perceive the effectiveness of soft skills modules in equipping them for the workplace? By investigating these questions, the study aims to provide insights that can inform curriculum development and pedagogical practices, ensuring that soft skills training is both relevant and impactful for students.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to contribute to the ongoing research on soft skills education in higher education, particularly within the Moroccan context. As Elouaali et al. (2024) note, the inclusion of soft skills in curricula "contributes to the development of learners, teachers, and the country

in general." By understanding students' perspectives, educators and policymakers can refine soft skills modules to better meet student needs and enhance their preparedness for the global workforce. This study, therefore, not only fills a critical gap in the literature but also offers practical implications for improving educational outcomes in Morocco and beyond.

2. Literature Review

Soft skills, encompassing interpersonal and cognitive abilities, are increasingly recognized as essential for academic and professional success (Wats & Wats, 2009). In Morocco, studies highlight a disconnect between educational practices and labor market needs, with soft skills often underdeveloped (Elouaali et al., 2024). Globally, research underscores the value of experiential learning in soft skills development (Kolb, 1984). This study builds on these insights, employing Experiential Learning Theory and Social Efficiency Theory to frame the investigation. In the Moroccan context, the importance of soft skills has been underscored by national educational reforms, such as the Strategic Vision 2015-2030, which calls for the integration of these skills into curricula to enhance employability (Elouaali et al., 2024). However, research indicates a persistent disconnect between educational practices and labor market needs, with soft skills often underdeveloped among Moroccan graduates (Mouheti, 2021). This gap is particularly evident in EFL programs, where the focus has traditionally been on linguistic proficiency rather than holistic skill development.

Globally, studies have highlighted the effectiveness of experiential learning in fostering soft skills. Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory posits that learning is most effective when it involves a cyclical process of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This theory has been widely applied in soft skills education, with scholars such as Laverie (2006) advocating for hands-on, immersive activities to enhance skill acquisition. Similarly, Social Efficiency Theory, which emphasizes the alignment of education with societal and workforce needs, underscores the importance of designing curricula that equip students with the competencies required for professional success (Schiro, 2008).

Despite the growing body of research on soft skills, there remains a lack of qualitative studies exploring students' perceptions of soft skills training, particularly in the Moroccan higher education context. While studies such as those by Hanafi and Ouhamdi (2024) have examined teacher and student perceptions at the secondary level, little attention has been paid to university students' experiences. This study addresses this gap by adopting a qualitative approach to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of Moroccan English Studies students toward soft skills modules, providing valuable insights into their lived experiences and the perceived effectiveness of current training methods.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the attitudes and perceptions of Moroccan English Studies students toward soft skills modules. A qualitative approach was chosen to capture the depth and complexity of students' experiences, allowing for a nuanced understanding of their perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data were collected through questionnaire-based interviews, which were administered online via Google Forms due to time constraints that precluded face-to-face interviews.

The study was conducted at Mohammed V University in Rabat, Morocco, within the English Studies program. Eleven undergraduate students (four males and seven females), aged 21 to 25, were purposively sampled based on their prior exposure to soft skills modules. This sampling method ensured that participants had relevant experiences to share, enhancing the richness of the data.

The questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses about students' general opinions of the modules, the perceived importance of soft skills training, challenges faced, and the application of learned skills in real-life contexts. The online format allowed for wider accessibility and facilitated higher response rates while maintaining the exploratory nature of qualitative inquiry.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach. First, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data by reading and re-reading the responses. Initial codes were then generated, focusing on recurring patterns and key concepts. These codes were clustered into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and relevance. Finally, the themes were defined, named, and interpreted in relation to the research questions.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured of their anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses. The questionnaire was designed to be clear and accessible, ensuring that participants fully understood the purpose of the study and their role in it.

4. Results and Discussion

Thematic analysis revealed four key themes: Mixed Perceptions of Usefulness, Desire for More Practical Application, Recognition of Useful Skills, and Gap Between Theory and Practice. These themes provide insight into students' attitudes toward soft skills modules and their perceived effectiveness in preparing them for the workplace.

4.1 Theme 1: Mixed Perceptions of Usefulness

Students' attitudes toward the soft skills modules were varied, with some expressing positive views and others voicing strong criticism. Positive perceptions were often linked to the modules' potential to enhance personal and professional development. For example, one participant noted, "The soft skills modules are interesting and doable," adding that they "help me grow" (Female, 22, Third year). However, negative perceptions were equally prevalent, with some students dismissing the modules as "useless" and "superficial" (Male, 21, Third year). Ambivalent views were also present, with students acknowledging the importance of soft skills but critiquing the way they were taught. As one master's student remarked, "They are important but the way they are taught is not appropriate" (Female, 23). These mixed perceptions highlight the need for a more consistent and effective approach to soft skills training.

4.2 Theme 2: Desire for More Practical Application

A recurring critique was the modules' heavy reliance on theoretical instruction, with students calling for more hands-on learning opportunities. Many participants felt that the theoretical focus undermined the modules' value, as exemplified by one student who stated, "It is not important because it focuses only on the theoretical explanation... without teaching the student how to use them in real life" (Male, 21, Third year). In contrast, students advocated for experiential learning methods, such as group projects and role-playing activities, to enhance skill acquisition. A master's student shared, "One challenge I faced was coming out of my comfort zone, especially during public speaking or roleplay activities... More of that would help so much" (Female, 25). This theme underscores the importance of aligning soft skills training with Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory, which emphasizes the role of concrete experience in effective learning.

4.3 Theme 3: Recognition of Useful Skills

Despite their critiques, many students identified specific soft skills from the modules as valuable for their future careers. Commonly cited skills included time management, teamwork, communication, and public speaking. One participant listed "active listening, time management, teamwork, conflict resolution, and giving receiving constructive feedback" as key competencies (Female, 25, Master's). Interestingly, some students also mentioned academic skills, such as "mastery of research methods" (Male, 21, Third year), suggesting a broader interpretation of soft skills. This recognition of useful skills indicates that, despite the modules'

shortcomings, students perceive their potential relevance to workplace preparation.

4.4 Theme 4: Gap Between Theory and Practice

A significant barrier to workplace readiness was the perceived disconnect between classroom learning and real-world application. Students frequently expressed frustration over the difficulty of translating theoretical knowledge into practice. One student reflected, “Learning about them was easy because you can just memorize their definitions but applying them is not as easy” (Male, 21, Third year). Additionally, the lack of real-world opportunities to practice skills was a common concern, with one participant noting, “I still did not use it” (Female, 21, Third year). This theme highlights the need for more structured opportunities for skill application, such as internships or simulations, to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the need for Moroccan higher education to shift toward more experiential soft skills training. By addressing the gap between theory and practice, curricula can better prepare students for the workforce, contributing to national educational goals and global employability standards. This study has provided valuable insights into the attitudes and perceptions of Moroccan English Studies students toward soft skills modules. While students recognize the importance of soft skills for their future careers, they express dissatisfaction with the current theoretical focus of the modules and call for more experiential learning opportunities. The findings highlight a critical gap between the intended outcomes of soft skills training and students’ actual experiences, suggesting that curriculum reforms are necessary to enhance the relevance and effectiveness of these modules.

To address these issues, educators and policymakers should prioritize the integration of hands-on activities, such as simulations, group projects, and real-world collaborations, into soft skills curricula. Additionally, professional development for instructors should focus on experiential pedagogy and the assessment of soft skills to ensure that teaching methods align with students’ needs. By bridging the gap between theory and practice, Moroccan higher education can better prepare students for the global workforce, contributing to both individual success and national development goals.

Future research should explore the perspectives of instructors and employers to provide a more comprehensive understanding of soft skills education in Morocco. Longitudinal studies tracking graduates’ career outcomes could also shed light on the long-term impact of soft skills training. Despite its limitations, this study offers a foundational exploration of students’ experiences and serves as a catalyst for further inquiry into soft skills development in higher education.

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