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Soft Skills Development through Task-Based Language Learning: Insights from Higher Education in the Malaysian Context

Haida Umiera Hashim* 

Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)
 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

Erikson Saragih 

Universitas Sumatera Utara (USU)
 Indonesia

Nurfarah Saiful Azam , **Hanna Insyirah Mohd Sukri** 

Nur Asyrani Che Ismail , **Noorfarida Filzah Mohd Sobri Paridaluddin** 

Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)
 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

Abstract. This study investigated the development of soft skills through task-based language learning (TBLL) in higher education in the Malaysian context. With the growing emphasis on graduate employability and 21st century competencies, it has become increasingly important to integrate soft skills into language instruction. Employing a mixed-methods approach, this study combined quantitative and qualitative data to ensure methodological triangulation and deeper understanding. Data collection involved a survey of 102 language lecturers, distributed via an online platform (Google Forms), followed by a focus group discussion with 4 experienced language educators. The survey aimed to identify key soft skills emphasized in current language instruction, while the focus group provided richer insights into their classroom implementation and pedagogical strategies. The survey results revealed communication, collaboration, and problem-solving as the most essential soft skills, which subsequently guided the qualitative phase of the study. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data was conducted using Miles and Huberman's framework (1994). Findings underscore the effectiveness of TBLL in promoting these soft skills, particularly when tasks are authentic, learner-centred, and aligned with real-world contexts. However, the study also identified challenges, including limited teacher training, curriculum constraints, and lack of institutional support. The

* Corresponding author: Dr. Haida Umiera Hashim, haidaumiera@uitm.edu.my

study concludes with practical recommendations for integrating soft skills into language curricula more systematically. These include professional development for educators, curriculum redesign, and institutional commitment to holistic education. Overall, this study contributes to ongoing discussions on enhancing language education through TBLL while supporting the development of soft skills crucial for students' academic and professional success in the Malaysian higher education landscape.

Keywords: higher education; language learning; Malaysia; soft skills; task-based

1. Introduction

In the realm of modern education, the integration of soft skills into language learning has become increasingly recognized as a vital component in preparing students for success in today's globalized and interconnected world (Sydorenko, 2020). Soft skills, encompassing attributes such as communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and intercultural competence, are essential for navigating diverse social and professional environments. According to Kováčiková (2020), in the context of task-based language Learning (TBLL), which emphasizes authentic language use in real-world tasks, the integration of soft skills holds immense potential for enhancing students' overall language proficiency and employability. Willis (2022) believed that the importance of integrating soft skills into TBLL stems from the recognition that language proficiency alone is insufficient for students to thrive in today's fast-paced society. Employers across industries increasingly seek candidates who not only possess linguistic competence but also demonstrate the ability to communicate effectively, work collaboratively in teams, solve complex problems, and navigate cultural differences. TBLL, with its emphasis on authentic tasks that mirror real-world scenarios, provides an ideal platform for nurturing these crucial soft skills alongside language acquisition (Sharma, 2023).

Despite the evident benefits of integrating soft skills into TBLL, especially in the tertiary-level context, challenges persist in its implementation and sustainability. Factors such as curriculum design, teacher training, assessment methods, and institutional support play crucial roles in shaping the success of soft skill-integration initiatives. However, recent studies indicate that many educators still struggle to align TBLL approaches with soft skills outcomes due to a lack of clear pedagogical frameworks and limited training in real-world task design (Powell, 2024; Rodríguez-Peñarroja, 2022). Moreover, discrepancies between institutional goals and classroom realities often hinder the consistent application of TBLL methodologies, especially in contexts where standardized testing dominates assessment practices (Ngọc, 2023; Sirbu & Georgescu, 2023). These challenges highlight the need for more research-informed practices and systemic support to fully harness the potential of TBLL in developing soft skills at the higher education level. Furthermore, educational philosophies and societal expectations vary between countries, necessitating a different understanding of how soft skills integration manifests in different contexts to help equip graduates with the necessary soft skills. In conjunction with this, this study aimed to investigate the

relevance of soft skills development in TBLL and how language educators develop tertiary students' soft skills through TBLL classrooms and assessments that can guide educators, policymakers, and stakeholders in fostering a holistic approach to language education. As the target of language learning is to improve students' ability to interact and thrive in diverse linguistic contexts, it is essential to draw the bridge of soft skills in language learning as there is evidence of its positive influence on language proficiency (Serik et al., 2024). By examining the integration of soft skills in TBLL, this study also intended to identify ways in which educators enhance students' soft skills development. This study is underpinned by the following research questions:

- RQ1. What are educators' perceptions of the relevance of integrating the three identified soft skills (i.e., communication, digital literacy, and teamwork skills) in task-based language learning?
- RQ2. How would educators enhance soft skills in task-based language learning in tertiary classroom settings?

2. Literature Review

The integration of soft skills into TBLL is grounded in constructivist and socio-cultural theories, emphasizing the importance of authentic, meaningful tasks for language learning (Hatmanto & Sari, 2023; Szabó & Csépes, 2023). In the context of TBLL, learners who engage in genuine communicative tasks can enhance not only their language production but also their overall linguistic development. This emphasis on real-world communication aligns with the growing global demand for individuals to be equipped with strong soft skills in today's interconnected and rapidly evolving world (Karimi & Pina, 2021). Employers across industries mainly emphasize the importance of attributes such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability alongside technical competencies (World Economic Forum, 2020). As a result, Qizi (2020) believed that educational institutions are under pressure to equip students with a holistic skill set that includes both technical and soft skills as it can significantly augment individuals' capacity for employment and contribute to their professional efficacy in varied occupational contexts. Therefore, the focus of TBLL should extend beyond the goal of language proficiency to also fulfil the development of soft skills increasingly expected of language learners.

2.1 Benefits of Task-Based Language Learning Approaches for Students

By engaging students in real-world activities that require collaboration, critical thinking, and problem-solving, TBLL creates opportunities for holistic language development. Various approaches have been proposed for integrating soft skills into TBLL. For example, task design plays a crucial role, with tasks structured to promote communication, negotiation, and teamwork. Collaborative learning strategies, such as group projects, peer feedback, and role-playing, are commonly used to foster interpersonal skills and intercultural competence (Kusmiarti & Yuniati, 2020). Additionally, Ghanizadeh et al. (2020) mentioned that explicit instruction and reflection on soft skills in language learning contexts contribute to deeper understanding and application. Research suggests numerous benefits associated with integrating soft skills into TBLL. Beyond improving language proficiency, students develop transferable skills such as adaptability, leadership, and conflict resolution (Poláková et al., 2023). Soft skills integration also enhances

students' confidence, motivation, and engagement with language learning tasks (Rodríguez-Peñarroja, 2022). Furthermore, employers increasingly prioritize candidates with strong soft skills, highlighting the relevance of such integration for employability (Yong & Ling, 2023).

Apart from this, the pedagogical approach of TBLL is also recognized for its capacity to promote collaborative learning among students. Egele and Odion (2019) highlighted a significant relationship between TBLL implementation and the cultivation of intrinsic motivation in a task-based framework. Specifically, TBLL activities, including role-play scenarios, inherently require learners to engage in teamwork and communicate effectively, facilitating deeper comprehension among group members. This is evident from the study by Ly (2024), who researched the use of role-play techniques in improving language learning among Vietnamese students. The findings revealed that role-playing stands as an effective teaching technique that promotes collaboration and pair work by engaging learners in realistic scenarios. This interaction requires students to actively listen, respond, and support their partner. This will foster teamwork and improve interpersonal skills, namely cooperation and negotiation, alongside language development, in a structured environment. Furthermore, Truong (2021) discovered that teamwork and communication are importantly developed through role-play task-based activity, which further significantly improves students' skills at comprehending real-life situations. Hence, the adaptation of TBLL in various classroom activities eventually contributes to the development of important soft skills, namely teamwork and communication. These two skills are indeed highly practical and needed in the workplace. Since students could gain early exposure to and practice in these skills, they can be well-prepared when starting their jobs in the future.

Aside from the teamwork skills gained through TBLL, this contributes to cultural differences, which become part of the essential element to be observed from TBLL activities conducted. To elaborate, most TBLL activities usually gather students to do the task together. Considering students are of various backgrounds, including their culture, this factor eventually affects the performance throughout conducting any language learning activities. In a simpler context, if a teacher instructs students to do a group discussion, the mannerisms – ways of thinking and exchanging ideas showcased by students – would differ from one student to another. Thus, learning a culture through a language is inseparable. For example, in learning English itself, culture plays a key role in English language acquisition, influencing what motivates learners, how they perceive the language, and their approaches to communication (Hossain, 2024). Furthermore, through TBLL activities done among students, such as initiating discussion or doing classroom activities together, students from different cultural backgrounds would gather and start exchanging ideas. To exemplify, Ly (2024) proved that through conducting role-play activities in the classroom for learning English as a foreign language, students showed improvement in both communication skills and cultural understanding. This is doable since in a language learning session, the instructor can adopt a presenter role to facilitate knowledge acquisition through targeted activities such as providing corrective feedback. Simultaneously, they can prompt students to articulate the relationship between presented artifacts and

their cultural heritage, further fostering active engagement and contributing to language development (Senda, 2023). Thus, TBLL approaches in the classroom have indeed showcased positive contributions in sharpening important soft skills in students.

2.2 Task-Based Language Learning Integration in Asia

In Malaysia, the integration of soft skills into educational curricula has been a focal point of policy reforms aimed at enhancing graduate employability and holistic development. Recent initiatives underscore a commitment to embedding these competencies across various educational levels. In December 2023, Malaysian Education Minister Fadhlina Sidek announced a “fresh approach” for the 2027 school curriculum, emphasizing character education and socio-emotional learning from preschool to higher secondary levels. This curriculum is designed to produce knowledgeable and competent students by incorporating specific time slots for character education and focusing on practical socio-emotional learning. Additionally, an integrated learning class will be introduced in primary schools to combine content and skills from various disciplines, allowing students to apply knowledge, skills, and values in a holistic manner. Despite these efforts, challenges persist in the effective implementation of soft skills programs. Fadel et al. (2022) revealed that the introduction of a new soft skills framework in Malaysia faced issues related to student and lecturer understanding, as well as operational hurdles, but it did not stop Malaysian educational authorities from keeping a proactive stance in embedding soft skills in the curriculum. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives depends on addressing implementation challenges and ensuring alignment between policy objectives and on-the-ground practices.

In the pursuit of producing qualified individuals equipped with essential soft skills, it is crucial to understand both the application and the challenges associated with integrating soft skills into TBLL. It is believed that such integration has garnered significant attention in the field of language education due to its potential to enhance students’ communicative competence, intercultural awareness, and overall employability (Ngoc, 2023). Sholawati et al. (2022) identified several challenges related to the integration of soft skills in language learning, including limited teaching materials, learners’ preconceived notions of English as solely a proficiency-oriented subject, inadequately trained instructors, and a lack of understanding regarding the psychological readiness of both educators and learners. In addition, educational institutions often face challenges in effectively integrating them into curricula. Soft skills development requires deliberate instructional strategies, opportunities for practice, and assessment methods that go beyond traditional testing formats (Hawari & Noor, 2020). Additionally, cultural and contextual factors influence the interpretation and prioritization of soft skills, leading to varying approaches across different educational contexts and regions. Therefore, to ensure effectiveness, there is a need for comprehensive teacher training, effective assessment methods for soft skills, and alignment with curriculum objectives (Oliveira & de Souza, 2022). Escolà-Gascón and Gallifa (2022) believed that cultural and contextual factors also influence the interpretation and prioritization of soft skills in educational settings,

especially in tertiary education. Addressing these challenges requires collaborative efforts among educators, institutions, and policymakers.

Indonesia and Malaysia are two Southeast Asian countries with rapidly growing economies and expanding higher education sectors. Both countries place significant emphasis on developing graduates' language proficiency and soft skills to meet the demands of a competitive global market. While both countries emphasize the importance of these skills for graduates' success, differences in educational policies, cultural values, and linguistic diversity may shape approaches to integration (Damayanti, 2019). English language proficiency, identified as one of the six key elements in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025, emphasizes the development of students' foundational literacy and numeracy skills, a goal that can be effectively supported through TBLL (Hassan et al., 2021). In alignment with the nation's educational vision, a study by Azlan et al. (2019) employed observation and interviews as part of a TBLL approach to facilitate the development of soft skills among children. The study yielded positive outcomes, demonstrating the effectiveness of this integration. Similarly, in Indonesia, Hassan et al. (2021) concluded that the implementation of TBLL effectively enhanced pupils' soft skills, particularly speaking, in the context of the Literacy and Numeracy Screening (LINUS) Program. Hassan et al. (2021) revealed that Indonesian learners experience significant improvement in terms of speaking skills through an experimental design of TBLL. As English as a second language speakers, the incorporation of soft skills in TBLL enhances learners' autonomy, which is considered a more successful approach as compared to traditional pedagogy (Hassan et al., 2021). Evidently, these two countries present unique approaches for integrating soft skills into TBLL which have proven to be successful.

Despite the success of integrating soft skills into TBLL across different countries, two significant gaps remain. First, there is a lack of comprehensive evaluation of educators' perspectives and their receptiveness to this approach. Second, while existing literature discusses soft skills integration in specific regions, there is a notable absence of comparative research exploring soft skills development in TBLL across diverse higher education contexts. Thus, this study aimed to address both gaps by providing valuable insights into educators' readiness and the strategies needed for the effective integration of soft skills into TBLL in the Malaysian higher education context.

2.3 Language Learning Theories

There have been many theories related to language learning. For instance, second language acquisition (SLA) theory generally deals with the primary focus of investigating either the specific type of the second language (L2) knowledge gained by learners or the cognitive and psycholinguistic mechanisms at play during L2 learning (Papi & Hiver, 2024). This is, then, usually associated with declarative and procedural knowledge toward learning the targeted language. In SLA theory, declarative knowledge deals with the learner's understanding of the information related to the subject matter or any given task, while procedural knowledge reflects the practical ability to perform the task (Suzuki, 2024). The famous SLA theory was discovered by Krashen (1982), who generated the acquisition learning hypothesis under SLA theory. Krashen (1982) proposed a

dual system of second language development. *Acquisition* occurs through natural, communicative engagement where learners attend to the form of their spoken language, whereas *learning* represents the conscious awareness of language structures gained through formal teaching. Therefore, incorporating SLA theory into TBLL activities is relevant since it encourages learners to reflect on their comprehension to perform the task assigned.

Another theory for language learning is the noticing hypothesis by Richard Schmidt (1992). Schmidt (1992) used this theory to further explore how learners notice and process specific language elements through manipulated input, features of real communication, and whether they eventually use those elements themselves. Application of this theory in the language learning process centralizes the significance of attention and awareness during the process, which implies that learners who concentrate better on the input of the language are more likely to acquire new language features. Thus, in adapting to TBLL activities, this theory can help learners to be more focused at mastering the language. However, in the present study, the data analysis is based on thematic analysis without applying any of the above-mentioned theories. To clarify further, the findings obtained pertaining to soft skills can be directly categorized by using thematic analysis since the analysis does not require use of particular theories or framework.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed both qualitative and quantitative research methods, encompassing both a survey and a focus group discussion with experts in the field. Using two methods simultaneously, also known as methodological triangulation, signifies the confirmation of the findings and, at the same time, reduces any flaws of a method by the strength of another one. To illustrate this point, the data collected from the survey were used to construct the questions as prompts for the focus group discussion. This helped in building a solid foundation in soft skills constructs as a basis for the discussion in exploring the participants' views on soft skills integration (i.e., first research question), as well as the ways to enhance them in the classroom (i.e., second research question).

3.2 Samples and Data Collection Procedures

As for the quantitative method, the survey was developed and distributed among 102 respondents, consisting of language lecturers, through an online platform (i.e., Google Forms). To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, its items were adapted from established instruments in previous studies and reviewed by two experts in language education. The reliability of the instrument was confirmed through a pilot study to ensure internal consistency. The questionnaire consisted of both open- and closed-ended questions on respondents' experience in developing their students' soft skills, and thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. Based on the findings of the survey, three soft skills deemed as necessary to be acquired by students (Table 1) were used to construct the questions for the focus group discussion.

Table 1: Soft skills needed according to order of importance

No.	Soft skill	Percent
1.	Communication	90.19
2.	Digital literacy	85.29
3.	Teamwork	74.50

Table 1 presents the results from data analysis based on the survey. It displays the percentage scores for the three different soft skills, with communication skills emerging as the most essential, confirmed by 90.19% of respondents. Digital literacy skills follow closely at 85.29%, displaying its rising significance in today's academic and professional contexts. Lastly, teamwork skills, although scoring the lowest of all three skills, at 74.5%, were still deemed more essential for university students compared to other skills such as creativity, time management, and problem-solving, which were ranked lower. This suggests that language educators, as represented by the respondents, generally perceive these skills as highly relevant for undergraduate students to acquire. Several respondents even agreed that these skills, especially communication, are indicators of how well the students will be able to adapt to workplace routines in their future career life. The indicator of this skill lies in the ability to effectively share information and achieve mutual understanding (Al Asefer & Zainal Abidin, 2021). Meanwhile, digital literacy skills refer to the competency of using digital tools wisely, securely, and effectively (Rinekso et al., 2021), and teamwork skills indicate the ability of individuals to undertake actions in achieving a shared goal (Al Asefer & Zainal Abidin, 2021).

The above findings provided essential preliminary data for the construction of the focus group questions to address the first research question (i.e., What are educators' perceptions of the relevance of integrating the three identified soft skills [i.e., communication, digital literacy, and teamwork] into TBLL?). The focus groups assisted us in delving deeper into the participating educators' rationale behind identifying these particular soft skills and their perspectives on how they can be developed through TBLL activities. To ensure the triangulation of data and collect the needed data to address the two research questions, qualitative data were collected through a focus group discussion with four language lecturers from higher education institutions. These participants were purposefully selected based on their teaching experience of more than four years as they were deemed to have a deeper understanding of and experience in developing students' soft skills in the language classroom. The participants were briefed on the background of the research and the purpose of the study being conducted. The discussion centred on the respondents' views on soft skills implementation and their strategies in TBLL, which allowed us to further cross-validate the findings. The focus group session was recorded and transcribed and the information summarized, following the technique of data analysis by Miles and Huberman (1994).

4. Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed on the quantitative data gathered from the survey that was developed and distributed to 102 language lecturers as respondents through an online platform (i.e., Google Forms). Based on the data collected from the survey, descriptive statistical analysis was performed to identify the three soft skills deemed necessary for students to acquire. The data were used to develop prompts to collect data to address Research Question 1.

For the qualitative data analysis, Miles and Huberman's technique (1994) was employed, which consists of three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion-drawing or verification. Asipi et al. (2022) summarized the model as follows. **Data reduction** begins by summarizing the research data, prioritizing key takeaways, and recognizing the patterns and themes within the data collected. **Data display** involves the data being organized in ways to facilitate the conclusions to be made and often employs a variety of presentation techniques, such as brief descriptions, flowcharts, or other visual representations. The final stage is **data verification or conclusion-drawing**. This stage of data analysis involves interpreting the presented data and extracting meaningful conclusions following the research questions. The conclusions are then tested for validity. The data reduction stage was done by using thematic analysis to interpret the qualitative data obtained from the discussion, in which repeated themes were sifted through to further examine the data collected (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). This method also allowed for the variables to be explored that shaped the participants' perceptions of integrating soft skills into TBLL. It was also done to analyze the data collected from the discussion to determine the relevancy of the three soft skills in TBLL and the ways in which participants enhanced students' soft skills development in the language classroom. To mitigate the potential biases in self-reported data, the participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity of their feedback in the discussion. Moreover, both the survey and interview questions were worded neutrally to reduce framing effects.

5. Research Validity and Credibility

A few measures were implemented to ensure the validity and credibility of the research. As mentioned in the previous section, the quantitative data gathered were used to construct the questions for the focus group discussion. This methodical triangulation enhanced the credibility and validity of the research findings (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021; Noble & Heale, 2019). In addition, the study obtained approval from Universiti Teknologi MARA's (UiTM) Research Ethics Committee (REC), in which the research design was reviewed and the research was conducted according to the standard guidelines and regulations (Research Ethics Committee, 2018). Cohen's kappa coefficient was measured to ensure that the inter-rater reliability of the instrument was established (Rau & Shih, 2021). The results indicated a substantial agreement between two expert raters based on the interpretation of values by Landis and Koch (1977). Lastly, the research methodology is detailed in this report, ensuring its replicability and transparency. In summary, the above rigorous steps were taken to further strengthen the validity and credibility of the results.

6. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study according to the research questions. The study aimed to investigate the relevance of soft skills integration and strategies to improve university students' soft skills through TBLL.

6.1 The Relevancy of Integrating Soft Skills (e.g., Communication, Digital Literacy, and Teamwork Skills) into Task-Based Language Learning

To evaluate the relevance of integrating the three identified soft skills—communication, digital literacy, and teamwork—a focus group discussion was conducted with four educators. Based on the data analyzed from the survey (the three identified soft skills), the educators were prompted to provide their professional perspectives of the importance of these skills in educational settings, drawing from their practical experience. Importantly, the links between educational and teaching/learning topics, particularly in the context of higher education, highlighted the necessity and significance of soft skills in educational settings (Zahn et al., 2024).

Overall, Educator 1 agreed with the survey outcome indicating that communication skills are considered the most fundamental soft skill needed by students in TBLL, followed by digital literacy and teamwork. Educators 2 and 3 had a similar outlook on the relevance of the three soft skills. Although they agreed that communication skills are still the most important, they believed that teamwork followed prior to digital literacy. On the other hand, Educator 4 had a different opinion, indicating that the most needed soft skill to be acquired by students is teamwork, prior to communication skills, then followed by digital literacy. Each of the educators provided their justifications based on their professional experience, which will be further elaborated below.

Based on the four educators' input, deductions were made, analyzed, and tabulated as findings (Table 2). The findings are indicated using a range from 1 to 3 indicating the level of relevancy, where 1 is the most relevant skill and 3 the least relevant skill.

Table 2: Level of relevancy of the three identified soft skills as per participants

Educator	Communication skills	Digital literacy	Teamwork
1	1	2	3
2	1	3	2
3	1	3	2
4	2	3	1

Table 2 displays the level of relevancy of integration of the three identified soft skills in the context of TBLL from the perspectives of the four educators. Communication skills were rated the most relevant by the majority of the educators, followed by teamwork, while digital literacy was deemed the least relevant. Based on the educators' views, communication was considered the most relevant and essential, particularly in relation to task complexity and toward the nature of meaningful learning. The educators indicated that learners frequently struggle with effective communication upon engaging with TBLL, which can

hinder overall task execution. The majority of the educators emphasized that communication skills are prominent and must be prioritized over teamwork and digital literacy, with a lack in communication possibly impeding students' ability to develop and apply the two other skills effectively. Zahn et al. (2024) mentioned that enhancing students' communication abilities is becoming more essential, with their findings underscoring the critical role soft skills play in higher education, particularly in digital learning environments.

Furthermore, the educators highlighted that tertiary institutions commonly implement various TBLL tasks that require collaborative work. These tasks would require students to engage in group-based activities such as delivering presentations or developing online content, both of which demand effective communication for task delegation and coordination. Without the initial foundation of clear communication, it will be challenging to develop the skills that follow, therefore reinforcement of the notion that communication skills are the most needed fundamental skill to be acquired for the successful incorporation of teamwork and digital literacy.

Once communication skills are acquired, students would be better equipped to engage in teamwork rather than executing tasks individually. With the success of its application, students would project better confidence in group discussions, addressing a common challenge related to poor communication. According to the educators, acquiring and developing good communication skills primarily would lead to better teamwork and better digital literacy skills, ultimately enabling students to complete assigned TBLL tasks more efficiently and autonomously.

6.2 Implementation of Strategies in Enhancing Students' Soft Skills in Task-Based Language Learning

This section presents the results of the thematic analysis in relation to the ways language educators implement strategies in developing their students' soft skills through the TBLL assessments and lessons. The data from the focus group discussion were transcribed and grouped using thematic analysis for the process of data reduction and display. Consecutively, themes were developed, reviewed, and defined. This was done to further triangulate the data. Analysis of the discussion data yielded four key themes related to the strategies of soft skills development in TBLL settings. These are 1) direct integration of soft skills through structured activities, 2) implementation of positive learning environments, 3) interrelation of language proficiency and soft skills development, and 4) utilization of varied pedagogical approaches. The following sub-sections discuss each of the key themes in detail.

6.2.1 Strategy 1: Direct integration of soft skills through structured activities

This strategy implies the need to design classroom activities with the intention to develop soft skills among the students. It highlights the importance of setting the purpose of the lesson right in the beginning, which is to enhance students' soft skills. The majority of the participants preferred the *doing* of soft skills among their students and to let them experience it rather than just lecturing about the necessity of soft skills in theory. Educators 2 and 4 emphasized that in letting students experience the soft skills, any tasks assigned should start with guided groupwork or an in-class activity, especially in classes with low-proficiency students. This

will, to some extent, “force” them to be responsible to initiate their assignments and lead to teamwork and decision-making, as observed by the participants. Educator 3 further supported the idea but with an extension of group management by the educator, following the in-class activity. The group management includes organizing the grouping of students and further instructions for the assignments, which will later provide students with the opportunity to be confident and communicate with each other outside of the classroom. As Educator 3 explained:

“I would rather let the students experience doing the soft skills in the classroom itself and that it must be starting from the class and expanding to the practice of the soft skills on their own outside of the classroom. For example, we assigned them to be in groups in the classroom for the task, and to complete the task; they have to communicate together outside of the classroom after class hours. This means that they had to communicate, which is the soft skill that we want them to have, whether they prefer to do it or not to complete the task.” (Educator 3, focus group discussion)

The findings stress the importance of setting the classroom activities specifically to cater to soft skills development. This echoes the finding of a study by Kostikova et al. (2021), where they purposefully designed game-based learning with the aim to develop soft skills among university students in English lessons. It was noted that the students developed critical thinking, creativity, emotional intelligence, teamwork, interaction, conflict management, stress resistance, and flexible consciousness skills (Kostikova et al., 2021) after participating in the games. This implies that certain soft skills can be effectively gained through the correct activities and tasks not just in English lessons but also in other subjects in tertiary education. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the designing of the activities must be in accordance with the university guidelines on which competencies are to be developed (Powell, 2024).

6.2.2 Strategy 2: Implementation of positive learning environments

The second strategy puts emphasis on the learning environment itself, which must support students’ soft skills development. Participants drew attention to a classroom environment that is both comfortable and supportive that allows students to actively participate, take charge of their own learning, and build confidence, all of which contribute to essential soft skills that are needed for university students (Powell, 2024; Serik et al., 2024). Powell (2024) seconded this notion in her paper, stating that freedom in decision-making in language learning allows for the advancement of not just soft skills but also hard skills. If students are given the opportunity to choose their own team members to work with, or which problems of the task to do first, this will enable them to work independently, which will require more decision-making and critical thinking. This notion is supported by data from the focus group discussion, where Educator 1 stated that it is essential for educators to create a “safe space” for their students, who must at the same time practice autonomous learning skills on their own.

Based on her research, Powell (2024) outlined the workflow pattern illustrated in Figure 1 as a guideline for educators to incorporate soft skills into TBLL and teaching in a supportive manner.

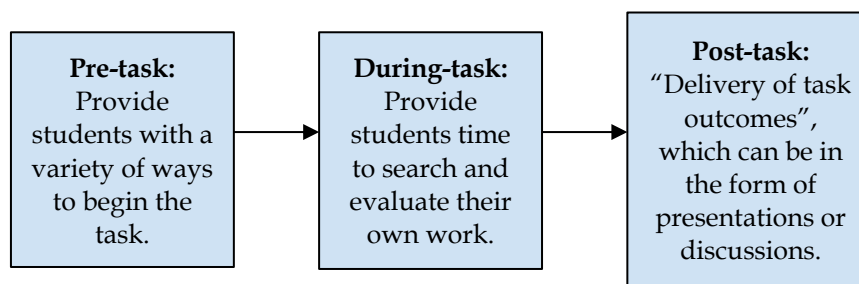


Figure 1: Workflow for task-based activities to integrate soft skills into language learning

The pre-task stage illustrates the above explanation, which will ignite students' motivation and interest to work for the task. This is essential as it will be a starter in the path toward enhancing their soft skills. The during- and post-task stages require more independent learning, which will provide students the platform to practice more soft skills, such as communication, leadership, interpersonal, and problem-solving skills. The more students are given chances to be active in their own learning, the more they will demonstrate commitment to learning the content, especially if it relates to their real-life routines that permit them to be creative and innovative. In this light, educators also play a role both in choosing the appropriate task that provides the students with more control in their learning process and simultaneously capturing their interest in the content of the lesson itself.

6.2.3 Strategy 3: Interrelation of language proficiency and soft skills development

The third strategy reveals the need to connect language proficiency to soft skills. It implies that developing students' language skills can indirectly improve their soft skills by providing them with the correct platform and motivation for effective communication. To illustrate the point further, Educator 1 addressed the need to apply this strategy for larger classes (e.g., more than 30 students). As it is almost impossible to enhance the students' soft skills individually while focusing on finishing the syllabus at the same time, educators must begin by explaining the importance of improving English proficiency. The participant further argued that by understanding the need for their proficiency to be improved, the students will begin the quest to improve themselves. This will, in turn, benefit related soft skills such as teamwork to get the group assignments done, delegating tasks to proceed with the presentations, and so on. This proves that educators can maximize the effectiveness of language learning to expand their students' soft skills as language programs enable the "*time and space for teaching variation and developing creativity in students*" (Powell, 2024, p. 132).

Other studies have shown that improvement of soft skills can be done through language proficiency classes, regardless of the programs the students are in (Fakhretdinova et al., 2022; Rido et al., 2023). Table 3 presents the data gathered from various studies over recent years on improving soft skills via language proficiency classes. The below activities highlight the effectiveness of using language proficiency classes, which might typically include a large number of students, to impart soft skills in a singular execution. Nonetheless, taking into account the participant's idea from the focus group discussion, educators must

first emphasize the importance of achieving proficiency or the objectives of the tasks to actualize the soft skills acquisition.

Table 3: Soft skills improvement through language proficiency classes

No.	Language proficiency activities	Impact on soft skills
1.	Discussion, debate, groupwork, and video-making on the topic of sustainability.	Improvements can be observed on critical thinking, problem-solving, leadership, creativity, upholding justice, and environmental accountability skills (Fakhretdinova et al., 2022).
2.	Lessons centred on problem-solving and task-based activities.	Problem-solving tasks facilitate discussions on ethical issues, enabling students to enhance specific skills, such as creativity, leadership, collaboration, interpersonal skills, and time management. In addition, task-based activities encourage students' creative and critical thinking, together with teamwork skills (Sirbu & Georgescu, 2023).
3.	Tasks that extend beyond classroom settings, such as public speaking training.	Students obtain valuable communication skills, boost their confidence levels, and are more adaptable to the workplace demands after the training (Rido et al., 2023).

6.2.4 Strategy 4: Utilization of varied pedagogical approaches

The last strategy builds upon the idea that language educators should vary their pedagogical approaches to promote the development of soft skills among students. The participants collectively agreed that different soft skills can be targeted with different activities, all to cater to different learning styles and proficiency levels. This strategy allows for equal opportunities among the students in enhancing their skills. For example, Educator 1 shared his experience of including writing tasks such as email and letter writing to instill skills in written communication. Paired with peer evaluation sessions as the continuation, the tasks also allow for soft skills such as teamwork and collaborative skills to be strengthened. The participant also implemented a reward system as an additional approach to boost the students' extrinsic motivation in completing the tasks. These methods display the inclusivity of multifaceted approaches as an effort to improve students' soft skills, while acknowledging the idea that the "one-size-fits-all" model is insufficient in the said effort. These findings echo the report by Sahudin (2022), who mentioned that soft skills may be teachable using appropriate learning approaches, which, if applied well, can be beneficial for both individual and career growth. Figure 2 summarizes several language tasks that can be done to promote the development of soft skills among students.

A few researchers have pointed out that language tasks may also make use of active and experiential learning that will automatically impart soft skills through real-life situations and social interactions. Situated learning, as emphasized by Sahudin (2022), that includes cooperative learning, field trips, or even music in

classes may enable students to look at real-world issues, further promoting social interactions and cooperation. Meanwhile, Cinque and Kippels (2023) also shed light on using an activity such as debate, aside from collaborative learning, as a structured technique to allow students the space to be actively engaged in the learning process, at the same time promoting the soft skill of argumentation (Renaldo & Fadloeli, 2021). Undoubtedly, the range of approaches in incorporating soft skills into language learning has been wider than ever, ranging from individual guidance to structured techniques and, lastly, to complex challenges that involve solving problems. Language educators must be able to implement a variety of teaching methods that maximize students' soft skills development. At the same time, they must take into consideration the shifts in pedagogical approaches over the recent years, including the digital transformation that has affected the teaching and learning process today (Medvedeva, 2021).

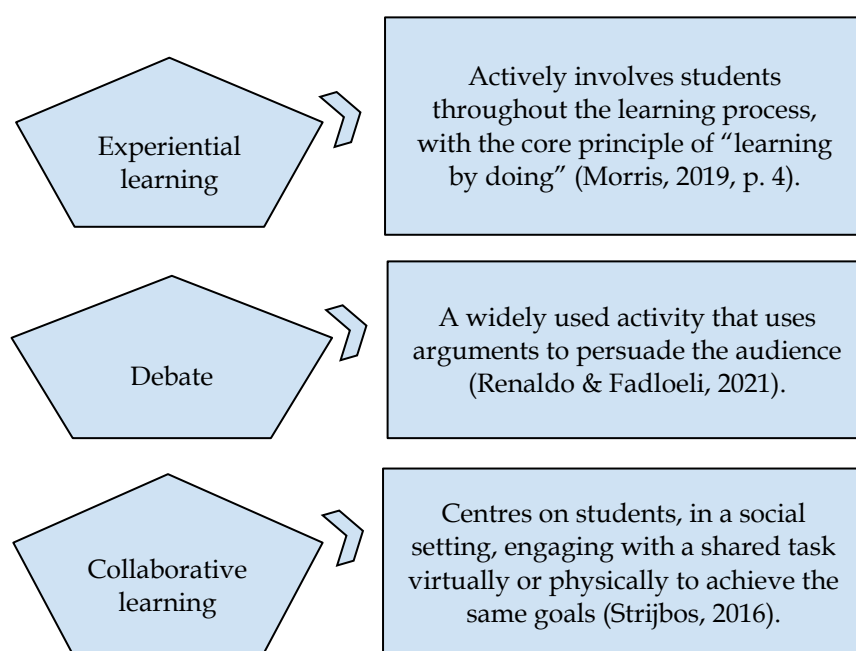


Figure 2: Language tasks in promoting soft skills development

7. Conclusion

This study highlights the potential of TBLL in fostering soft skills development among students in higher education in the Malaysian context. The findings from the survey and focus group discussion reveal that communication, teamwork, and digital literacy skills are among the most essential soft skills needed in language learning. The integration of these skills through TBLL not only enhances students' linguistic competence but also prepares them for real-world challenges. However, the study also identified challenges in implementing TBLL effectively, including time constraints, curriculum alignment, and the need for proper instructional support. Addressing these challenges requires institutional support, professional development for educators, and the adoption of structured yet flexible TBLL frameworks. Institutions can support educators by offering ongoing training, setting aside time in the curriculum for TBLL activities, and providing flexible teaching resources that connect language learning with soft skills development.

Educators can take a collaborative and reflective approach, adapting TBLL strategies to better suit their students' needs and the realities of their teaching environment. At the policy level, the Malaysian Ministry of Education may consider revising existing TBLL guidelines to explicitly incorporate soft skills outcomes, ensuring greater alignment between national education goals and classroom practices.

Nonetheless, it is essential to note several limitations of this study that may have influenced the interpretation of the responses. While the sample size for the quantitative data was sufficient for initial analysis, it poses a potential risk to the generalizability of the most needed soft skills among tertiary students. It is recommended that future studies include a more representative number of respondents. Moreover, although efforts were made to minimize bias in self-reported data, the subjective nature of the data should be taken into account in data interpretation. Future research should incorporate observations to enhance the research validity. Overall, this study reinforces the importance of incorporating soft skills into language education through interactive and student-centred methodologies.

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