

The Impact of Teaching Soft Skills Awareness and Practice for Saudi EFL Students: Bridging the Classroom and Workplace

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Abstract—Soft skills are distinctive traits that reflect individual differences among people when they are equal in qualifications but vary in personal abilities. Accordingly, organizations and employers set their terms of employment to include different soft skill parameters. The current study aims to investigate the impact of teaching soft skills to Saudi EFL students. The focus is on two variables: students' awareness of soft skills and instructional practices of soft skills implemented in the classroom. The study was conducted in the English Language Department at Jouf University in Saudi Arabia. To collect the data, 106 male and female students participated by completing a questionnaire to assess awareness and practice of soft skills and their correlation with the workplace. The results revealed a significant level of student awareness of soft skills, although the female students were more conscious of the concept than the male students. The findings also revealed that the most common instructional practices of soft skills implemented in the classes related to communication, leadership, teamwork, critical thinking, and flexibility. In contrast, issues of time management, creativity, problem-solving, and values orientation generated less interaction and engagement through instructional practices, despite these skills being significant for students' readiness for professional life.

Index Terms—soft skills, EFL students, workplace, employers, teaching practice

I. INTRODUCTION

Global changes have caused a remarkable shift, resulting in social transformation, economic growth, and a workforce seeking skilled and qualified labor. An academic qualification is significant, but it is not adequate for ongoing professional development (Aziz et al., 2024) and is no longer sufficient for job market requirements (Islam et al., 2024). Employers seek candidates who can acquire or demonstrate soft skills, such as problem-solving, decision-making, encouraging and motivating others, communication, and collaboration (El Messaoudi, 2021; Gembaruk, 2024), and who are proficient at meeting workplace demands (Ngo, 2024). Therefore, hard skills alone are insufficient for the workforce, so attention should be directed to soft skills (Kumari & Vitharana, 2024), as they are crucial for one's success, and closely intertwined with emotional intelligence, life skills, and social interaction (Caga-anan & Valle, 2024).

In recent years, soft skills have become a component of contemporary instruction used interchangeably with other terms such as "skills for employability" and people skills (Kostikova et al., 2021). It represents "a dynamic combination of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, interpersonal, intellectual, and practical skills" (Haselberger et al., 2012; as cited in El Messaoudi, 2021, p. 119). It is also defined as "the abilities, skills, and traits that pertain to personality, attitude, and behavior rather than to formal or technical knowledge" (Shakya & Dube, 2023, p. 130).

Strengthening such skills improves opportunities and supports career advancement through holistic personal growth, thereby increasing job readiness. Teaching soft skills can bridge the gap between academic preparation and job market demands for key proficiencies in communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability, resulting in confident and qualified students who can meet job expectations (Aprilita & Pritasari, 2024). Indeed, one of the primary responsibilities of educational institutions is to produce skilled employees for the workforce (Islam & Das, 2023) who possess not only professional knowledge but also the soft skills that enable them to complete tasks creatively, make decisions independently, and be effective team members. Furthermore, it is a vital practical activity that should emerge early in an educational context to prepare students for the future, highlighting the need to integrate employability skills in the curriculum, syllabus, training, and teaching. When hard and cognitive skills are taught with greater emphasis than soft skills (Islam et al., 2024), insufficient attention is paid to crucial qualities, affecting students' readiness for employment (Saranya & Guduru, 2022). In this scenario, an employee lacks the necessary communication and teamwork skills, which may make it challenging to be a productive team member, given the importance of personal qualities for success (Kostikova et al., 2021). A skill gap can then be observed, as a basic mismatch between universities' outputs and market requirements (El Messaoudi, 2021).

Keeping pace with global shifts and in harmony with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, Jouf University has endeavored to equip its students for the labor market. In particular, providing Saudi students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) with future employment skills is necessary as they face "increasingly more competitive job application requirements" (Kivunja, 2015; as cited in Alghamdi, 2022, p. 39). Learning English is an effective approach to improve soft skills that directly relate to global market competition (Ellah & Azmi, 2024). Therefore, this study investigates the extent to which

EFL students are aware of soft skills and how they are implemented into the pedagogical process.

In recent years, integrating soft skills into classrooms has gained increasing attention, particularly in teaching English language learners, where students must acquire essential competencies for diverse professional situations. Due to the significant impact of such skills, achieving high academic qualifications alone is insufficient for a successful career. There has been some concern about the distinct challenges encountered by Saudi employees when applying English in professional contexts (Al-Tamimi, 2025), due to the multiple challenges faced by educational institutions to equip English graduates with the necessary market skills (Alharbi, 2022). The misalignment between graduates' qualifications and the evolving demands of the workforce has been attributed to students' lack of awareness of the significance of soft skills for career development (Saranya & Guduru, 2022). Employers and organizations need qualified candidates who practice effective communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and demonstrate other personal skills. Accordingly, assessing EFL university students' understanding of the concept of soft skills, as well as their perception of the relevant instructional practices, is a fundamental area of study. The findings of this research may offer valuable insights to enhance and reinforce Saudi universities' initiatives in this regard.

The study poses three main questions:

1. To what extent do Saudi students in the English Language Department demonstrate awareness of the concept of soft skills?
2. What classroom instructional practices do Saudi students in the English Language Department perceive as being influential for the workforce?
3. Are there statistically significant gendered differences in soft skills awareness among English Language Department students?

This study aims to investigate the following objectives:

1. Assess Saudi EFL students' awareness of the concept of soft skills.
2. Explore Saudi EFL students' readiness for employment through identifying the soft skills implemented in classroom instructional practices.
3. Determine whether the difference in awareness among students is related to gender.

The study's significance lies in its empirical contribution, which is based on investigating EFL students' awareness of soft skills and classroom instructional practices in comparison with the skills demanded by the workforce. The findings provide grounded evidence of how soft skills are implemented in the English Language major at Saudi universities and are perceived by students. Based on the researcher's knowledge, few studies have examined this topic in the Saudi context. This is believed to be the first study to investigate three dimensions simultaneously: students' awareness of soft skills, instructional practices of soft skills, and the influence of gender. Moreover, the findings offer a conceptual framework for decision-makers to guide instructional practices and review curricula to focus on employability skills.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *The Concept of Soft Skills*

Soft skills were introduced as a significant concept within educational and professional contexts in 1972 and gained prominence in the 1990s (Khoudri, 2024). When Daniel Goleman coined the term "emotional intelligence" in 2006, he highlighted the significance of this attribute, rather than IQ, as a critical factor in improving professional settings (Nazari et al., 2015). Indeed, professional success is influenced by "soft skills," defined as "personal qualities that enable you to communicate well with other people" (Hussein, 2024). The shift toward soft skills has been attributed to the insufficiency of hard skills, which encompass technical elements (e.g., typing speed, machine operation, computer programming) or teachable abilities (e.g., proficiency in learning a foreign language or a relevant degree) (Boonmoh & Chanchay, 2024). Conversely, soft skills are "non-technical involving interpersonal and intrapersonal skills to expedite controlled performance in certain social contexts" (Hurrell et al., 2013; as cited in Saranya & Guduru, 2022, p. 35). Although no precise definition exists for soft skills, they are always linked with individual characteristics and traits. Identified as "life skills," "core skills," "key skills," or "employability skills" (Cornalli, 2018), they encompass analytical and critical thinking, oral communication, problem-solving, collaborative teamwork, work ethics, and leadership abilities (El Messaoudi, 2021). Thus, the definition has been expanded to describe the nature of interaction, incorporating basic skills to non-academic skills (Saleh, 2020). As transferable and valuable attributes, they enable people to interact effectively with others (Guerch & Bouklah, 2024; see also Doghonadze & Zoranyan, 2021). In this study, soft skills are conceptualized as a combination of personal traits and capabilities that surpass academic skills to empower an individual's achievement in the professional domain, and are considered a value-add to an organization's reputation.

B. *Teaching Soft Skills*

In the educational context, integrating soft skills into the EFL classroom has become a significant concern. Following a recent paradigm shift (Kasim et al., 2022), the teaching focus has moved away from the transmission of cognitive abilities to a complete integration of soft skills, because both educators and employers have recognized the importance of soft skills for students' academic and professional achievement (Mabić et al., 2024). Teaching soft skills prepares students to engage with multifaceted contexts (Karimova, 2025), giving them chances to practice their acquired skills in real scenarios, raising awareness of academic achievement, and workplace demands (Islam & Das, 2023). Engaging students

through cooperative activities, workshops, and real-world problem-solving situations helps them to create interpersonal qualities (Hussein, 2024).

Numerous studies globally have discussed teaching soft skills in EFL classes with a focus on new teaching methods (Hanafi & Ouahidi, 2024) and alignment with employability demands. Two approaches to teaching soft skills can be identified in educational institutions: first, designing courses to develop soft skills, and second, incorporating soft skills into the traditional curriculum (Ellah & Azmi, 2024). In their study, Boonmoh and Chanchay (2024) investigated how Thai ELT teachers incorporated soft skills into their instruction in the EFL classroom. The finding showed that soft skills were embedded within literacy and life skills, which are relevant to employability skills such as communication, teamwork, and technology literacy. Contrarily, some skills were less emphasized, such as leadership.

Additionally, incorporating English language activities such as role-play and group discussion into many interactive topics in training programs is effective in improving students' personality traits, including their universal values, critical thinking, communication abilities, and workplace etiquette. Saranya and Guduru (2022) revealed that Indian engineering students who enrolled in a soft skills training program in an ESL context gained confidence, improved critical thinking, and experience in adaptability, which shaped students' abilities in personal and professional contexts. Implementing activities improves language and soft skills, as Doghonadze and Zoranyan (2021) identified in a study of English classrooms at Georgian Technical University. They investigated the effect of teaching soft skills through presentations, discussion, debates, role-play, diaries, and portfolios to enhance a wide range of skills (problem-solving, communication, leadership, teamwork, decision-making, computer, critical, creative thinking, presentation, and reflection). The findings revealed that integrating soft skills into the curriculum and practicing activities were a vital point of study and integral to employability. Similarly, Kostikova et al. (2021) found that teaching English through game-based activities enhanced the soft skills of Ukrainian university students.

Embedding soft skills within the curriculum is critical, as Siddique et al. (2022) mentioned: "the course must include training on much-needed soft skills." Given the importance of this issue, Islam and Das (2023) explored the perceptions of Bangladesh English teachers and graduates regarding embedding soft skills within the English literature curriculum and their relevance to employability. Although soft skills were implicitly embedded in the curriculum, they were not articulated in a form that enables transferability, with skills instruction highlighted as one of several issues. One of the responsibilities of enhancing students' soft skills lies with teachers' practical instruction, as Hanafi and Ouahidi (2024) highlighted. They investigated the perception of Moroccan high school teachers and students concerning soft skills tuition in the English language curriculum. The findings revealed that although teachers positively perceived the significance of soft skills for students' future, their application within the classroom was disparate. The students appreciated the relevance of soft skills to academic and professional growth, but lacked familiarity with soft skills in the classroom due to the quasi-absence of related activities. Similarly, Boudemagh (2024) recommended that teachers should raise students' awareness of soft skills. As part of their training, university students should acquire employability traits such as leadership, communication, teamwork, and a constructive attitude (El Messaoudi et al., 2023), skills of particular significance for English graduates whose employability depends on cognitive and non-cognitive skills (Islam & Das, 2023).

Saleh (2020) also investigated the incorporation of soft skills into educational programs for EFL teachers at Libyan universities, revealing a lack of concern for soft skills in the English Language Department curriculum. The participants received little or no training in essential soft skills like communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, teamwork, and leadership. Embedding soft skills into EFL training programs is a fundamental factor for teachers to improve their professional effectiveness. This point is asserted by Jones and Thirunagari (2019), who emphasized the significance of integrating soft skills into English language program training for both Indian teachers and students to improve the quality of instruction and learning outcomes.

C. Awareness and the Workforce

Raising students' awareness of soft skills is essential for universities whose mission is to serve the community by delivering qualified graduates for a dynamic work environment. Thus, one of the imperative issues in higher education is preparing graduates for the escalating and competitive demands of the contemporary workforce. While hard skills are significant for technical proficiency, soft skills are essential for emotional intelligence, enabling students to perform successfully in life and the workplace. Recent graduates transitioning from university to employment require some skill adjustments, including acclimating to the organization, work capacity, and relationship-building, which they likely did not experience while studying (Nugroho et al., 2024). Interpersonal abilities and effective communication are required to fill the gap between academic knowledge and companies' needs (Kaburise, 2016; as cited in Aziz et al., 2024). Equipping the students with essential skills is one of the university's roles, requiring them to adopt advanced pedagogical methods to improve soft skills alongside conventional academic skills (Hussein, 2024). Teaching soft skills is necessary for students' development (Saleem et al., 2024) and to support their personal growth, career success, and positive social interaction (Boonmoh & Chanchay, 2024). This is an awareness of effective instructional practices to meet the twenty-first-century demands for employability and education. Thus, university instructors are required "to change the way they teach to encourage more rigorous group work, better project planning, more effective feedback and the use of well-framed questions to drive authentic enquiries into real-world problems" (Lucas, 2016; as cited in Saleh, 2020, p. 99).

To enhance educational outcomes, an understanding of the correlation between soft skills and the workplace is essential to meet contemporary labor market expectations. Studies conducted around the world have assessed this correlation. At

Taif University, Saudi Arabia, Hussein (2024) explored the significant role of soft skills in preparing postgraduates for the workforce, revealing that postgraduates possess a notable degree of recognition of soft skills, including anger management and networking skills. Islam et al. (2024) investigated the increasing number of unemployed graduates in Bangladesh, particularly among English majors: the lack of soft skills awareness was noticeable. The findings revealed a positive correlation between raising awareness of soft skills and actual practice. Although soft skills are recognized as fundamental, students showed a lack of sufficient awareness of their potential to enhance professional and personal success. For example, Ngo (2024) assessed undergraduate students' perceptions of eight Vietnamese universities. Although the participants considered soft skills necessary for their personal and academic achievement, they perceived them below the expected level. Similarly, Ramlan and Ngah (2015) showed 76.7% of students at the University of Kuala Lumpur believe that soft skills lead to better opportunities. By contrast, Aziz et al. (2024) investigated Moroccan undergraduates' comprehension of soft skills and employability. Asked to identify fourteen soft skills in a questionnaire, the students identified just five top skills and showed limited awareness of the issue. The findings focused on the teacher's role in raising students' awareness of soft skills by enhancing their understanding of the implications for their future careers.

D. Soft Skills and Gender

An increasing number of Saudi women are participating in the workplace. According to Saudi Vision 2030, the female participation ratio has risen from 22% to 30% (Alajlan & Aljohani, 2024), exceeding the target. Several initiatives are supporting women and maximizing their engagement in the labor market. For example, in alignment with its Vision, Saudi Arabia has implemented gender-inclusive laws to guarantee women equal rights and opportunities as men. Thus, the correlation between women and soft skills is encouraging, as women are "highlighting interpersonal abilities" (Aziz et al., 2024, p. 10). Some limited studies have linked soft skills with gender. Setiati (2023) explored the significance of soft skills and gender differences in students' proficiency levels. She found better performance in communication, interpersonal skills, and professionalism among women, but male students showed enhanced flexibility and work ethics. Aziz et al. (2024) found female students possessed a greater concentration of soft skills, particularly in time management, discussion, and positive attitude.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

To answer the research questions outlined in the introduction, the study adopted a quantitative descriptive design to explore the impact of soft skills tuition on Saudi EFL students' awareness of workforce readiness. This approach describes a phenomenon, investigating the correlation among variables, and collects the data without manipulating conditions.

B. Participants

The participants in the study included English Language majors in the College of Arts at Jouf University during the academic year 2025. The total comprised 106 students enrolled in the third and fourth levels, including 70 females (66% of the sample) and 36 male students (representing 34%). The participants were randomly selected to ensure fairness and prevent bias. See Table 1 for demographic information.

TABLE 1
PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS BY GENDER AND ACADEMIC YEAR

Variable		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	36	34.0
	Female	70	66.0
	Total	106	100.0
Academic Year	Fourth year	52	49.1
	Third year	54	50.9
	Total	106	100.0

C. Study Instruments and Data Collection

To collect data, the study used a structured questionnaire designed by the researcher after a comprehensive review of empirical studies and relevant theoretical literature. The questionnaire comprised three sections. The first section collected demographic data, including participants' information (gender and academic year). The second section related to students' awareness, consisting of six statements to measure their perception of the concept of soft skills. The third section included nine soft skills, represented by 27 statements (three for each skill) to assess students' perceptions of EFL teachers' practices. Participants' responses were rated on a five-point Likert scale with statements ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Data collected through the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

D. Study Validity and Reliability

The questionnaire's apparent validity was verified by eight qualified experts with relevant academic and professional experience. They evaluated the questionnaire for its appropriateness, comprehensiveness, linguistic accuracy, and the

alignment of each item. Based on their revisions, an 80% consensus rate was achieved for the final version.

A pilot study was conducted on thirty volunteer students that revealed a correlation between item scores and the total score. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient range (0.832–0.917) was statistically significant at the 0.01 level. Hence, the final version of the instrument comprised 33 items categorized into two main axes. The first consisted of a single dimension of six items, and the second included nine dimensions. According to Guilford (1954), any item with a correlation coefficient below 0.30 was rejected.

To verify the study instrument's reliability, Cronbach's Alpha Test was used to evaluate the internal consistency of each dimension and the whole instrument. To ensure the validity of quantitative data, a pilot study was conducted on 30 participants who were not part of the main study sample. The test result was 0.965, which is an acceptable level of internal consistency across all study dimensions.

E. Ethical Consent

Ethical standards were strictly observed, with the participants informed at the outset about the study objective, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Their identities were kept confidential. The consent form was submitted in advance for approval by the Ethics Committee at Jouf University.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The descriptive and statistical data were analyzed in accordance with the three dimensions of the study, as outlined by the three research questions.

A. Results

(a). Research Question 1: To What Extent Do Saudi Students in the English Language Department Demonstrate Awareness of the Concept of Soft Skills?

The results revealed that students were aware of the concept of soft skills, as illustrated in Table 2.

TABLE 2
STUDENTS' AWARENESS OF THE CONCEPT OF SOFT SKILLS

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Awareness Level
1. "Soft skills" refers to the personal traits and qualities that deepen individuals' potential to carry out tasks effectively.	3.89	1.063	High
2. Soft skills are crucial for academic qualifications.	3.72	1.076	High
3. Being aware of soft skills prioritizes employment adoption.	3.83	1.064	
4. Soft skills are as important as hard skills, which focus on cognitive knowledge.	3.83	1.064	High
5. Soft skills help students recognize and develop their strengths.	3.83	1.150	High
6. Employers today consider soft skills essential for fostering creativity.	3.74	1.072	High
Total	3.8050	.95493	High

Item 1 ("Soft skills" refers to the personal traits and qualities that deepen individuals' potential to carry out tasks effectively) was valued at the highest mean ($M=3.89$, $SD=1.063$). While the mean value ($M=3.83$) of items 3, 4, and 5 was identical, the standard deviation for item 5 scored the highest (1.150), whereas items 3 and 4 were the same ($SD=1.064$). Such variability was attributed to either the difference in participants' understanding or the ambiguity of the items' content. Item 6 (Employers today consider soft skills essential for fostering creativity) had a lower mean ($M=3.74$, $SD=1.072$), but item 2 (Soft skills are crucial for academic qualifications) achieved the lowest ($M=3.72$, $SD=1.076$). Overall, the figures ($M=3.8050$, $SD=.9549$) for the dimension "Students' Awareness of Soft Skills Concept" were statistically significant.

(b). Research Question 2: What Classroom Instructional Practices Do Saudi Students in the English Language Department Perceive as Being Influential for the Workforce?

To capture students' perception of soft skills in classroom instructional practices, they were surveyed on nine skills as described below. Table 3 synthesizes the nine soft skills into one composite metric.

Communication skills were measured through three sub-skills, with the mean scores ranging from 3.83 to 4.17. The first sub-skill, "Communicating in English with classmates enhances students' confidence to speak effectively outside the class," scored the highest ($M=4.17$, $SD=.845$). "Practicing activities of English lessons, such as role-play, indicates readiness for a job" ranked second ($M=3.91$, $SD=1.000$), while "Listening to one another attentively is one of the EFL university teachers' norms" scored third ($M=3.83$, $SD=.990$). The overall mean score for communication skills ($M=3.9686$, $SD=.85638$) demonstrated significant awareness among participants.

In terms of teamwork skills, "Choosing the topics with EFL university teachers to be discussed with the team group" recorded the most frequent value ($M=3.94$, $SD=.903$), meaning it was identified as the most highly practiced among students in this dimension. "Cooperating with EFL university teachers to create university initiatives makes students proud of themselves" ranked second in terms of mean value ($M=3.91$, $SD=1.038$), whereas "Providing feedback to peer groups enhances English language performance" was ranked lowest ($M=3.85$, $SD=.964$). The teamwork overall mean score ($M=3.8994$, $SD=.84724$) demonstrated significant awareness among participants.

For leadership skills, “Sharing of organizing lesson activities with EFL university lectures enhances students’ sense of responsibility” was most frequently recorded ($M=3.92$, $SD=1.048$) and therefore deemed by students as the most highly practiced by teachers in this dimension. The second sub-skill ranked by students was “Prompting leadership skills, such as decision-making, by EFL university teachers, enhances confidence” ($M=3.85$, $SD=1.040$). The lowest-ranked sub-skill was “Guiding students while performing English tasks supports the leading of other situations in the future” ($M=3.79$, $SD=1.110$). The overall mean score of leadership skills was relatively high ($M=3.8553$, $SD=1.02562$).

In the dimension of flexibility, “Adapting to rapid changes in the English language teaching strategies and learning helps students to open up to others’ cultures” scored the highest frequency ($M=3.98$, $SD=.985$). “Discussing in class with peers and EFL university teachers lets students be adaptable to others’ points of view” ranked second ($M=3.96$, $SD=.995$), whereas “Responding to unexpected situations during English classes, such as ‘the changing group,’ is usually quite challenging” was the lowest ranking skill ($M=3.64$, $SD=1.106$). The overall mean score of the flexibility was 3.8616 ($SD=.93250$).

For time management, the sub-skill “Introducing some activities in the EFL classroom, like presentations, requires allocating time” attained the highest recognition ($M=3.91$, $SD=.961$) and was the most highly practiced by teachers, as rated from students’ perspectives. It was followed by “Submitting assignments with deadlines improves time value respect” ($M=3.81$, $SD=1.015$), while “Prioritizing the tasks of English lectures allows the students to keep time and fulfill their duties” scored lowest ($M=3.79$, $SD=1.002$). The overall mean score of time management skills was 3.8365 ($SD=.94868$).

In relation to problem-solving, the sub-skill “Asking EFL lecturers to clarify errors when communicating to fix the correct answers” was the most frequently perceived ($M=3.79$, $SD=1.002$). “Looking for more resources like online courses and language apps when finding problems in understanding the tasks” ranked second ($M=3.77$, $SD=1.063$), while the lowest scoring sub-skill was “Eliciting information and knowledge from some tasks, such as reading comprehension, prepares students to think deeply” ($M=3.74$, $SD=1.072$). The overall mean score for time management was valued at 3.7673 ($SD=.96409$).

In terms of values orientation, “Using polite phrases such as ‘Could you help me?’ and ‘I believe that’ in speaking and writing skills,” was the highest perceived item ($M=3.90$, $SD=.950$). “Integrating moral and ethical values by EFL lecturers when explaining lessons” was the second sub-skill perceived by students based on mean value ($M=3.77$, $SD=1.063$). The item with the lowest rate was “Listening skills support students’ respect for the diverse views of others” ($M=3.75$, $SD=1.049$). Consequently, the mean value of all items was statistically significant ($M=3.8050$, $SD=.92567$).

In the dimension of creativity, “Generating writing or speaking skills is one of the requirements for scoring high grades,” achieved the highest mean score ($M=3.85$, $SD=1.040$). “Integrating some activities such as brainstorming and role-play/storytelling, leads to creativity” ranked as the second item with a mean score of 3.81 ($SD=1.015$). The lowest item was “Identifying some talented students through explaining some courses like poetry, novels” ($M=3.72$, $SD=1.002$). In total, the mean score of all items ($M=3.7925$, $SD=.95002$) was statistically significant.

For critical thinking, “Evaluating information before sharing it in class is highlighted by EFL instructors” scored highly with a mean of 3.89 ($SD=.989$), followed by “Sharing of some class issues discussed with EFL instructors based mainly on thinking rather than feeling” ($M=3.87$, $SD=1.033$). “Comparing ideas and thoughts to be trusted before expressing them is emphasized by EFL instructors” was the lowest ranking item ($M=3.85$, $SD=1.058$). The overall values of items in this category were statistically significant ($M=3.8679$, $SD=.98741$).

Table 3 demonstrates how the total mean scores varied across the soft skills. The highest perceived skill was communication, while the lowest was time management. The other soft skills were graded as follows: teamwork scored second, and critical thinking was third. These skills were followed in order of total mean by flexibility, leadership, and values orientation. Creativity skills ranked seventh, and problem-solving ranked eighth.

TABLE 3
MEAN SCORES AND STD. DEVIATION ACROSS SOFT SKILLS DIMENSIONS

	Academic Year	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig.
Communication	Fourth	52	3.8333	.79349	-1.611	.110
	Third	54	4.0988	.90104		
Teamwork	Fourth	52	3.7949	.78147	-1.249	.214
	Third	54	4.0000	.90190		
Leadership	Fourth	52	3.6667	.92884	-1.881	.063
	Third	54	4.0370	1.08866		
Flexibility	Fourth	52	3.9103	.84821	.527	.600
	Third	54	3.8148	1.01285		
Time management	Fourth	52	3.8333	.82578	-.033	.973
	Third	54	3.8395	1.06151		
Problem-solving skills	Fourth	52	3.6154	.88901	-1.604	.112
	Third	54	3.9136	1.01805		
Value orientation	Fourth	52	3.5897	.89690	-2.403	.018
	Third	54	4.0123	.91336		
Creativity	Fourth	52	3.6538	.86309	-1.482	.141
	Third	54	3.9259	1.01698		
Critical thinking	Fourth	52	3.6154	.92269	-2.658	.009
	Third	54	4.1111	.99475		
Total	Fourth	52	3.7236	.73631	-1.560	.122
	Third	54	3.9726	.90130		

(c). *Research Question 3: Are There Statistically Significant Gendered Differences in Soft Skills Awareness Among English Language Department Students?*

There were statistically significant differences related to the gender variable (see Table 4). The T-test value had statistical differences in favor of female students (4.0905) compared to male students (3.2500). The result might be attributed to female social orientation, interpersonal abilities, motivation, classroom practices, or the greater female sample size.

TABLE 4
T-TEST FOR THE GENDER DIFFERENCE IN SOFT SKILLS AWARENESS

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T-test	Sig.
male	36	3.2500	1.21401	-3.893-	.000
female	70	4.0905	.62983		

B. Discussion

The majority of Saudi students in the English Language Department demonstrated high awareness of soft skills based on the six survey items (see Table 2). This outcome aligns with a contemporary educational trend that is giving increasing recognition to soft skills over non-technical skills. The findings are consistent with other studies that demonstrated students' perceptions of soft skills are important for employment and education (e.g., Ramlan & Ngah, 2015). Furthermore, Islam et al. (2024) highlighted that soft skills awareness among English graduates had a significant effect on their predicted practice. Tino and Fedeli (2024) emphasized the importance of reflection on soft skills for enhancing students' labor opportunities. In the researcher's view, Saudi Vision 2030 has overemphasized the development of technical human capital for effective participation in the country's advancement. Awareness of soft skills is the next critical step in workforce readiness, enabling students to recognize them, why they are needed, why they matter, and how they contribute value. National and global developments have also enhanced awareness among Saudi students regarding job demands. This finding aligns with Yusuf and Jamjoom's (2022) study, which highlighted that Saudi students are aware of the significance of employability skills to advance their professional ambitions.

In terms of the integration of soft skills instructional practices, the findings showed that most activities associated with soft skills (communication, leadership, teamwork, critical thinking, flexibility) were highly recognized by students (see Table 3). Communication skills were ranked the most significant. This is unsurprising given that the EFL classroom provides an opportunity to practice language and communication skills, and students perceive it as a valuable instrument for interaction and expression. Implementing communication activities, such as speaking, negotiating meaning, role-play, and presentations, engages students in real-world skills and enhances their recognition of the practical performance of language rather than its abstract use. The findings aligned with Boonmoh and Chanchay (2024), who found that communication skills were the most emphasized in classroom activities, and with other studies (Gembaruk, 2024; Ngo, 2024; Saragih et al., 2025) that underscored the significance of communication skills for the workforce. However, the findings contradicted those of El Messaoudi (2021) and Khoudri (2024), whose studies scored a low significance for communication skills.

The second-ranked skill was leadership, encompassing the ability to influence others to achieve goals, motivate people, and set expectations. To meet contemporary organizational needs, leadership is an important element for survival, affecting the decision-making processes, goal attainment, and staff performance. The high score reflected the students'

awareness of the pivotal role of leadership skills. This outcome aligns with Ingsih and Suhana (2023), who found that effective leadership enabled candidates to manage organizational responsibilities, and with Islam et al.'s (2024) study, which found leadership skills were the highest ranked.

Ranked in third place, teamwork skills reflected students' ability to work collaboratively by sharing tasks, coordinating to achieve common goals, providing mutual support, and sharing responsibilities. The findings revealed a positive attitude toward teamworking as an important soft skill for labor. Similarly, Saragih et al. (2025) found that teamwork is critical for recent graduates, enabling them to engage in meaningful interactions. The findings also aligned with Boonmoh and Chanchay (2024) and Khoudri (2024), who found that most students were capable of group work, and Gembaruk (2024), who found 50% of students showed outstanding teamwork capabilities. Teamwork skills are essential for organizations as they are required by most jobs (Ingsih & Suhana, 2023). However, the findings contrasted with those of El Messaoudi (2021), who found that entry-level employees did not feel comfortable working as a team, and with the teamwork assessment by Saleh (2020), which identified that 67% of participants lacked training to interact effectively with others.

The other significant skill in this study is flexibility, which enables employees to adapt to multiple tasks, enhance productivity, and satisfaction (Tongia et al., 2024). Flexibility is a critical skill for contemporary professional and academic achievement. It is not only an execution skill, but also helps navigate workforce challenges (e.g., technological disruption and system changes). When students show interest in flexibility, it indicates their awareness of strategy modification, acceptance of feedback, and adaptation to a changing professional context. The finding was consistent with Kostikova et al. (2021), who found that flexibility helped individuals adjust smoothly to unpredictable circumstances and provided opportunities for ongoing growth. By contrast, flexibility received little recognition in Boonmoh and Chanchay's (2024) study, despite its significance in language learning.

The findings demonstrated a lower awareness of some skills, despite their workplace significance. Time management is a crucial skill for academic success and professional productivity, enabling students to arrange tasks, set objectives, and meet deadlines (Nurlaila & Fadhillah, 2023). The findings contrasted with those of Aziz et al. (2024), which ranked time management highly and perceived it as demonstrating a positive attitude and readiness to learn. Time management is related to job performance efficiency, stress management, and task organization. Aprilita and Pritasari (2024) revealed the positive contribution of time management skills to productivity and excellence in the job context. When this skill received limited interest, the students lacked self-regulation and monitoring, with insufficient ability to plan, late achievement, and low productivity. One of the causes for low responses to time management is related to challenges in the EFL classroom. As Soumia (2020) stated, "poor lesson planning, ineffective classroom management, large classes, as well as the overloaded language syllabus are the main factors that negatively affect EFL teachers' instructional time management process" (as cited in Makuru et al., 2024, p. 2).

Another low-ranking skill was problem-solving, a complex skill involving emotions and thinking. EFL teachers need to engage their students in authentic scenarios to analyze and resolve problems. Chen and Lee (2024) found that students are poorly prepared to manage complex challenges in a professional context, and did not believe that problem-solving is important for career success. Ingsih and Suhana (2023) found that problem-solving had no positive effect on job readiness, as respondents were not involved in real work. This stance contrasts with several studies, including Ngo (2024), who ranked problem-solving as one of the top soft skills for career success. Further, Aprilita and Pritasari (2024) revealed that students perceived problem-solving as a skill for work readiness.

The findings showed fewer responses for the creativity skill. Creativity is defined as "coming up with new and unique ways to get things done that work and give you the outcome you want" (Cropley, 2019; as cited in Boudemagh, 2024, p. 15). Creativity is fundamental not only for creative professions but also for individuals to think outside the box, generate ideas, draw inspiration, and find accurate solutions (Kostikova et al., 2021). Graduates who lack creativity skills could hinder organizational development and resist novel ideas. This finding is partially in agreement with Gembaruk (2024), who observed creativity falling in the "above-average category" in students' soft skills but with "room for improvement".

Value orientation also received a low rating from students, reflecting limited awareness of its academic and professional importance. Value-oriented skills are widely recognized in a professional context, with employers and organizations seeking graduates who demonstrate integrity, responsibility, commitment, and ethical conduct. The findings aligned with Ingsih and Suhana (2023), who found no effect of ethics on work readiness. However, the researcher believes that these skills were taught implicitly rather than explicitly, which may explain why students' responses were diffuse and partial. It is not even clear how these skills could be assessed for both teachers and students. The lack of teachers' soft skills knowledge may also have an impact. For example, Ellah and Azmi (2024) identified that most teachers are aware of soft skills, but only occasionally integrate them in class activities. Part of the responsibility for greater training rests with English language teachers as they must develop tasks and activities to enhance soft skills practice.

One fundamental factor addressed was the effect of gender on the study results. Table 4 provides T-test results for male and female awareness of soft skills. The findings revealed a superior outcome for females compared to the male perceptions. The outcome aligns with Aziz et al. (2024, p. 10), who explained that "soft skills, which often involve emotional intelligence and interpersonal abilities, are more frequently linked to women." Similarly, Rybowska's (2024) study indicated that 58% of women scored highly on interpersonal skills, and Setiati (2023) found that, although male and female students demonstrated equal soft skill levels, female students showed stronger competencies in communication, interpersonal, and professionalism. Various factors can explain the gender findings. Most prominently,

females are more socialized than males, as reflected in their engagement in communication and collaboration skills. It has been demonstrated that women place a stronger value on interpersonal and emotional intelligence activities. The findings are also partially attributed to an imbalanced sample size distribution, with a higher proportion of female students. Therefore, further research is required to explore whether the result is related to gender differences or sampling distributions. It is also likely that instructional practices embedded within activities were varied, influencing the result.

In summary, embedding soft skills within the pedagogical process is a pivotal activity. It can help students to meet workforce demands and bridge the gap between academic qualifications and professional development. The identification of communication, teamwork, leadership, flexibility, and critical thinking skills as being of a higher priority than others indicates that students have frequent exposure to these dimensions, intentionally or unintentionally. EFL teachers design interactive activities, including presentations, role-play, and dialogue, or ask students to think critically, which encourages a social inclination, particularly with peers, and a desire to engage in activities. By contrast, several other skills, such as problem-solving, creativity, time management, and value orientation, received less emphasis. It is likely that there are shortcomings in implementing these dimensions in the EFL classroom activities, leading to the result. One of the challenges of teaching soft skills concerns their intangible nature, since they cannot be directly assessed but are reflected through individual behaviors and interactions. Accordingly, EFL teachers should be trained to design soft skills activities collaboratively and obtain pedagogical competencies to integrate them systematically in authentic contexts.

V. CONCLUSION

This study explored the impact of integrating soft skills in EFL classes at Jouf University. Corresponding to the ongoing changes in the labor market, universities have transitioned from teaching cognitive knowledge to practical transferable skills to facilitate adaptability in professional contexts. The study was an attempt to assess and bridge the gap between what was taught and what is required in the workforce. The findings revealed that EFL students were aware of soft skills as essential to workplace readiness, and demonstrated the positive results of instructional practices implemented in the EFL classes. Adopting soft skills in EFL teaching practices fosters university students' abilities to engage in activities required by employers, rather than focusing on linguistic competence. In particular, communication, leadership, teamwork, critical thinking, and flexibility are widely recognized by students, which reflects that the instructional practices were visible and observable. However, time management, problem-solving, creativity, and values orientation were perceived as being less significant. A potential reason for this outcome was the EFL teachers' lack of knowledge of how to integrate such skills into class activities. Regarding the effect of gender, the findings revealed that female students were more aware of soft skills than male students.

In light of the findings, the study recommends that soft skills should be embedded in the academic program outcomes of university majors, particularly in the English Language Department. Policymakers should clearly institutionalize a framework for the core soft skills demanded by the labor market, identify guidelines for supporting teaching strategies, develop assessment standards, and design a relevant curriculum. An effective partnership between policymakers and stakeholders is required to ensure the correct focus on labor market soft skills and to provide feedback on relevant topics, activities, and assessments implemented in the curriculum. To bridge the gap between graduates' qualifications and workforce expectations, the study recommends that these skills should be reflected explicitly and directly in the learning process. Thus, universities should adopt training programs to equip EFL teachers with pedagogical and practical competencies to raise awareness of the soft skills that need to be effectively observed, taught, and assessed.

Based on the findings, further studies should investigate a wider scope than the present study. Potential topics include EFL teachers' strategies and activities for integrating soft skills into the classroom, EFL teachers' awareness of soft skills and their implications for workforce readiness, EFL teachers' assessment of students' performance, and soft skills adoption to investigate gender differences. Further research should focus on soft skills that have not received attention in the literature, such as time management, problem-solving, creativity, and values orientation. Also, diverse methodologies should be explored to explain the effect of soft skills on personal and professional success, such as an observation instrument.

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