

# GENERAL SOFT SKILLS AND SUB-COMPETENCIES DEVELOPING PLURILINGUAL INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN SELF-REFLECTIVE UNDERSTANDING BY STUDENTS

ERICH PETLÁK

Faculty of Education, Catholic University in Ružomberok  
Hrabovská cesta 1A, 034 01 Ružomberok, Slovakia

E-mail address: [erich.petlak@ku.sk](mailto:erich.petlak@ku.sk)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7966-9924>

JANA BÍROVÁ

Faculty of Education, Department of French Language and Literature  
Charles University in Prague

Magdalény Rettigové 4, 116 39 Praha 1, Czech Republic

E-mail address: [jbirova@yahoo.fr](mailto:jbirova@yahoo.fr)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3378-7009>

## ABSTRACT

**Aim.** The research presents a division of soft skills important for better socialising and being.

**Methods.** The main method was a questionnaire survey completed by 98 pupils in the 3rd year of the mentioned schools.

**Results.** We briefly describe the findings of the self-reflective evaluations of the students of two high schools and how they perceive and appreciate their personality in terms of soft skills. We mainly focused on social and personality skills from several areas and divisions of soft skills.

**Conclusion.** Education must pay more consistent attention to the development of these skills because it is soft skills and their use in life that will be key not only for the advancement of the individual but for the advancement of the entire society. Based on our findings from the questionnaire, we make some important recommendations for the students.

**Keywords:** soft skills, competencies, pupils, students, social existence, plurilingual intercultural competence



## INTRODUCTION

In education so far, the emphasis has been given primarily to the knowledge and skills of students. These were, and still are, considered decisive for a person's further application in life. In literature, they are referred to as "hard skills". The term "academic skills" also occurs. We understand and refer to all competencies or skills that a person has acquired through formal education at school, but also through self-education or the performance of various activities. They are easily measurable, e.g., knowledge tests, answers to questions, writing a study, translating a text, etc. In the literature, they are also referred to as professional skills, i.e., necessary for a certain profession or activity, e.g., knowledge of a doctor for treating a disease, command of a foreign language for an interpreter, etc. Hard skills are legitimised by a report card, diploma, certificate, or certificate authorising performance in a certain activity.

In a changing world, to the manifestations and requirements of social and working life, in which people enter into many mutual contacts, to the requirements of the time, which require not only knowledge, social, communicative and other skills become increasingly emphasised. Current education must pay attention to them and prepare the growing generation for these new requirements. These skills are termed as soft skills (there is also the term "non-technical skills", transferable skills). They are also referred to as social-psychological, which means such competencies or skills that students do not learn in teaching subjects but acquire and develop during life through experiences and social contacts, in the family, at school, in groups, etc. (Candelier et al., 2012). They often refer to or are expressed as human character traits, etc. Soft skills are harder to measure. Psychologists and sociologists in recent times emphasise their extraordinary importance for a person's success and appeal for increased attention to be paid to them in education. These skills are not tied to a certain job or activity specificity but contribute significantly to its quality. We must emphasise that the statement "students do not learn soft skills in schools" no longer applies literally. On the contrary, they are beginning to receive attention in education, as several experts claim that soft skills will become an important part of thinking and work. Finally, even today, they are already appreciated, and in many professions even required, but we are not yet sufficiently aware of their impact and importance in the future, e.g., decisiveness in activities, employee flexibility, diligence, etc.

Soft skills have not yet been legitimised in this way. They cannot be quantified. They are perceived as certain personality traits, e.g., the ability to organise one's work, to be able to make decisions, to learn from self-reflection, etc. In this context, however, it should be emphasised that a mutual connection between hard and soft skills exists. The hard ones enable a person to perform certain work. The soft ones help a person succeed in his work and field (Berner, 2023; Fischer, 2022; Horkun, 2020).

Naming the skills as hard and soft is very recent. It has come into usage only in the last few years. The truth is that in the past, they were perceived as a matter of course and the ability of a person to adapt to the demands of work, time, society, etc. The development of psychology, sociology, pedagogy, and, in recent years, neuroscience have contributed to a significant appreciation of soft skills in particular. Their importance in human life is viewed differently, especially for the future. While before entering the 21st century, we emphasised soft skills only as 4C – critical thinking, communication, cooperation and creativity, nowadays their number is significantly extended. We relate today's time, e.g., with human flexibility, the diversity of the environment, the ability to learn from self-reflection, willingness and interest in learning, appropriate and serious assertiveness, etc. Also, methods and techniques of their development are being developed already during education in schools, and also concerning adults, e.g., different courses.

The literature lists many types of soft skills and breaks them down, e.g., methodical, personal, social, and communicative (Gueck, 2011).

**Table 1**

*Types of soft skills*

Methodical soft skills	Social soft skills	Personal soft skills	Communicative soft skills
creativity	emotional intelligence	engagement	active listening
organisational ability	intercultural competence	independence	language fluency
persistence	teamwork	decision-making ability	negotiation abilities
flexibility	integration ability	decisiveness	ability to persuade
resistance	resistance	analytical thinking	assertiveness
strategic thinking	ability to communicate	willingness to learn	enthusiasm
fast grasping	empathy	frustration tolerance	ability to formulate
structured work	knowledge of human nature	curiosity	contact ability
diligence	ability to cooperate	self-reflection	ability to motivate
self-control	ability to resolve conflicts	development ability	
connected thinking	willingness to delegate		
entrepreneurial thinking	competence of diversity		
focus on the goal			

*Source.* (Gueck, 2011).

Another division of soft skills worth mentioning was developed by a team of experts at the Council of Europe institution called the European Center for Modern Languages in Graz. This division is found in the document FREPA Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures (Candelier et al., 2012).

The authors of FREPA indicate progress in socialisation by knowledge, which they define in the Descriptors section - knowledge. They recommend to read also sections Skills and Attitudes. These are the three parts of FREPA descriptors, which predetermine the building of one of the key socialisation life competencies – plurilingual intercultural competence.

**Table 2**

*Types of soft skills FREPA*

Competence in managing linguistic and cultural communication in a context of otherness		Competence in the construction and broadening of a plural linguistic and cultural repertoire	
Competence in resolving conflicts, overcoming obstacles, clarifying misunderstandings	Competence in negotiation	Competence in profiting from one's own intercultural/ interlanguage experiences	Competence in applying more systematic and controlled learning approaches in a context of otherness
Competence in mediation	Competence of adaptability		
Competence of decentring			
Competence of making sense of unfamiliar linguistic and/or cultural features			
Competence of distancing			
Competence in critical analysis of (the communicative and/ or learning) situation and activities one is involved in			
Competence in recognising the „other“ and otherness			

*Source.* FREPA, Candelier et al., 2012.

By summarising the above, we arrive at the basic aspects that must be at the forefront of education. They are these:

**Self-awareness:** students learn to identify their own emotions, thoughts and values influencing their behaviour to assess their strengths and limitations. This is of considerable importance for self-confidence, promotes optimism and contributes to a growth mindset – the pursuit of self-improvement and desirable relationships with classmates – which also applies to the following characteristics.

**Self-control:** the student learns to successfully regulate his emotions, thoughts and behaviour in various situations, to effectively manage stress, control impulses and motivate themselves. It is important to guide pupils to setting personal and educational goals and working towards their achievement. This is also related to developing their organisational skills and encouraging their initiative.

**Social awareness:** education for social awareness and feelings consists of the fact that it leads the student to empathy, that is, to empathise with others, including people from different backgrounds and cultures. Part of the above also leads them to know how to respect others, sympathise with others, understand and perceive their perspectives, understand and express gratitude, etc.

**Relationship skills:** in this area, is the ability to build and maintain healthy, beneficial relationships with different individuals and groups. Important skills include clear communication, effective listening, working with others, resisting undue social pressure, constructively negotiating conflicts, and seeking and offering help when needed. Pupils are led to social engagement and understanding of teamwork's importance.

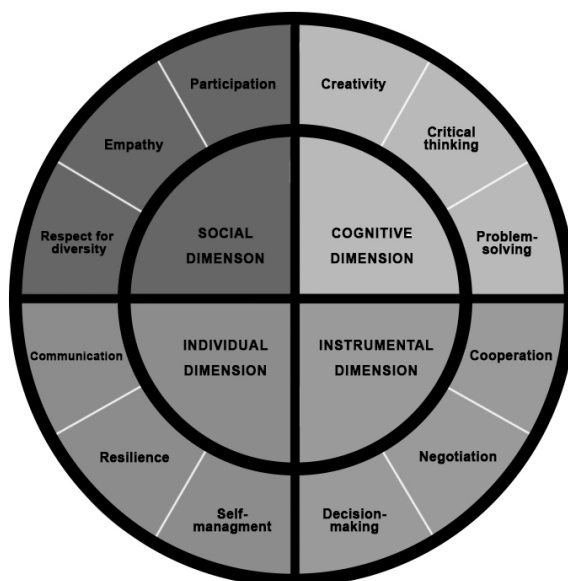
**Responsible decision-making:** the ability to make constructive decisions in personal behaviour based on ethical standards and social interactions. The ability to realistically assess the consequences of various actions, considering the interests of oneself and others. To teach students to identify their problems, lead them to analyse information, and expressions, cultivate critical thinking, etc. (Huber & Krause, 2018; Petlák, 2022, Reicher, 2018).

And other skills, such as toleration or acceptance of otherness, adaptation competence, code-switching competence, etc.

They are expressed in more detail and complexity in the following diagram.

**Figure 1**

*Dimensions of Soft Skills Development*



Source. Adapted from Education Section of the UNICEF Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2022

## RESEARCH GOAL, RESEARCH METHODS

In this part of the article, we briefly describe the findings of the self-reflective evaluations of the students of two high schools and how they perceive and appreciate their personality in terms of soft skills. The main method was a questionnaire survey completed by 98 pupils in the 3rd year of the mentioned schools.

We mainly focused on social and personality skills from several areas and divisions of soft skills.

Pupils answered 10 questions and assigned the level of assessment on the scale according to their discretion to their individual soft skills: 1 – excellent, 2 – good, 3 – fair, 4 – poor, 5 – bad. We have chosen the above assessment according to the usual assessment at school in order to make it easier for students to make decisions and assess their skills.

The aim of the research was two basic aspects:

- how students self-assess in individual areas of soft skills;
- The students' self-evaluation is also informative in that the obtained answers indicate how much attention teachers pay to the development and support of students' soft skills in the educational process.

The conducted survey is a pilot investigation of basic views on selected areas of soft skills, based on which further research activities will be created. The obtained results are in the following table.

**Table 3**

*The results of the answers of the high school students to the questionnaire questions.*

Question number	Replies									
	1		2		3		4		5	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	12	12.2	23	23.5	20	20.4	25	25.5	18	18.4
2	35	35.8	24	24.4	15	15.3	24	24.4	10	10.2
3	36	36.7	30	30.6	19	19.4	9	9.2	4	4.1
4	23	23.5	28	28.6	12	12.2	19	19.4	16	16.3
5	14	14.3	25	25.5	10	10.2	34	34.7	15	15.3
6	12	12.2	21	21.4	33	33.7	14	14.3	18	18.4
7	16	16.3	27	27.6	40	40.8	8	8.2	7	7.1
8	14	14.3	19	19.4	36	36.7	16	16.3	13	13.3
9	18	18.4	27	27.6	16	16.3	30	30.6	7	7.1
10	22	22.4	31	31.7	30	30.6	11	11.2	4	4.1

Source. Own research.

## ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

The obtained answers are processed in a table. In this place, we take an evaluative approach to the findings of the results.

*Question 1: How do you rate your motivation to fulfil school and other tasks and responsibilities?*

It is clear from the pupils' answers that self-motivation to work is not one of their strengths. The rating on a scale of 3-4 (20 – 20.4%, 25 – 25.5%) expresses the reality that we often state and emphasise that self-motivation and internal motivation are not among the strengths of our education. Also, extreme values 1-5 (12.2%) and 18 (18.4%) reflect the existing state. We consider them to be very low at 12.2% and, on the other hand, 18.4% as relatively high. The finding of the above results in requirements for teachers' educational work quality using motivational methods. It was confirmed that the students do not appreciate motivation as much they should. Of course, it is related to the teachers' work methods.

*Question 2: How do you create and maintain emotional bonds with others, e.g., make friends?*

Pupils' comments on the question regarding social aspects sound positive. As many as 59 respondents, 35 + 24 (35.8% and 24.4%) or 60.2%, believe they devote themselves to this social aspect and establish contact with classmates and others. The number of those who expressed that they do not know how to create and maintain relationships is smaller – 24 respondents (14.3% and 10.2%). However, what is often stated indicates increased attention should be paid to this area.

*Question 3: How do you rate yourself in communication with others, e.g., you can join a conversation, you have no problem supplementing the conversation with laughter, facial expressions, etc.*

The results say that even this side of soft skills is good when up to 66 respondents (36.7% and 30.6%) rate themselves as excellent and praiseworthy. Despite the above, we emphasise increased attention to communication in education because up to a third of respondents – 19 – 9 – 4, 32.7%, consider themselves less communicative. It is supported by newer concepts of education, e.g., in-depth teaching, emphasis on the emotionality of education and the use of various cooperative concepts of education.

*Question 4: How do you rate your assertiveness? (Assertiveness means - I know how to assert my opinions without anger and resentment, I know how to express my point of view non-violently, I know how to accept the opinion and criticism of others without anger, etc.)*

The answers to the mentioned question were less favourable. 23 + 28 respondents (52.1%) expressed themselves as excellent and praiseworthy - this is a very favourable result. However, it is worse with self-assessment in other points, when up to 47 (47.9) respondents self-assess as less able to control assertiveness. In further investigations, we will focus on finding



out the essence of the above. For now, we believe that the given area is not given due attention in education. We do not lead students to assert their opinions, thoughts, or recommendations in education. Pupils then adopt a certain "satisfaction status" and are not interested in changes, correction of reality, etc.

Question 5: *Evaluate how you control your emotions, e.g., whether you can control yourself when something makes you angry, whether you immediately get angry or think about what happened, whether you can appropriately express your opinion, whether you can calmly explain that something is not right in your surroundings, etc.*

A key competence from the field of soft skills. The respondents' answers show that the mentioned skill requires attention because more than half of the respondents basically do not control their emotions - 14 - 25 - 10 (50.0%). We do not consider this result to be optimal. Suppose we put the mentioned reality in context with the current requirements for education and the attention we pay to emotions. In that case, we will conclude that the mentioned area requires special attention. The answers confirmed that emotionality and its formation in education is not yet a strong point. 50% of respondents do not control and therefore do not follow their emotions.

Question 6: *Evaluate yourself - how you can manage and solve various unpleasant situations for you, e.g. if you get a bad grade, if you fight with your friends, if something doesn't go your way, etc.*

Compared to previous self-assessments, the situation is less favorable for this question. It follows from the respondents' statements that they do not quite know how to manage their emotions. What we found out in the previous question was confirmed. Up to a third of respondents, 14 + 18 (32.8%), do not know how to handle unfavorable, burdensome situations. This finding correlates with what is generally stated: young people are not prepared to deal with more challenging situations - in our research, this was reflected in a third of the answers. However, the same is also true in reverse: only a third of 12 + 21 (33.6)% know how to deal with unpleasant situations.

Question 7: *Evaluate yourself - how can you present yourself and create an image of yourself, e.g., you sign up for various competitions at school, you present your activity - photography, modeling, writing articles for the school journal and so on.*

The situation is more favorable in the mentioned area - 16 + 27 (43.9%) respondents appreciate these activities. In principle, even 40 (40.8%) respondents can be considered a favorable situation. Of course, we cannot remain indifferent to the group of 8 + 7 pupils (15.3%) who have certain inhibitions about self-presentation. This area will be the subject of our further investigations and finding out whether it is a lack of interest or problems associated with a low level of self-esteem. The reality of life is that nowadays, not only knowledge and skills are enough, but also "the ability to sell your work". This is also an area in which education must improve



the quality of its activities so that student's knowledge and abilities are used in their future lives.

Question 8: *Evaluate yourself - how you can organise your work and time, e.g., whether you have your daily routine, whether you plan your activities, whether you determine the order of completing tasks, whether you follow the plan you set, etc.*

The mentioned area is one of those to which special importance is attributed because the proper organisation of one's work is the basis of systematicity, but also of responsibility, prevents stressful situations, etc. Even in this area, we cannot be completely satisfied with the findings because more than half of the respondents commented that they know how to organise their work and time - 69-70.4%, but only 39-29.6%. This is subsequently reflected in the results of the student's learning activities, and last, but not least, it is not a good preparation for life.

Question 9: *Assess your ability to cope with potential failure at school, outside of school, in sports, etc.*

Failures are a part of our life. They should be seen as the results of one's activity, which may not always be successful. We ought to know how to accept them, evaluate them and take measures to inhibit them in further activity. Are our students ready for this? The findings showed that the respondents know how to deal with certain failures, and more than half of them expressed themselves in a positive way - a total of 61-62.3%. Of course, we cannot be satisfied that 37 - 7.1% of respondents rate themselves as sufficient or insufficient. It was also confirmed here, which is also often stated, that our students lack the skills to deal with failures, not resign, etc.

Question 10: *Evaluate your critical thinking - critical thinking is that you don't immediately believe everything you hear and read, but you think about it, discuss it, express your opinions based on your knowledge, experience, read articles, etc.*

Although critical thinking is a newer field of education, we can express satisfaction with the results of our research. In principle, up to 22 - 31 - 30 (84.7%) of research participants expressed that critical thinking is a matter of course for them. If we proceed from this finding, then we conclude that the students have the prerequisites for developing critical thinking as a basis for the correct formation and development of their personality, not only from the point of view of knowledge but also from the point of view of attitude towards several aspects of life.

## CONCLUSION

Above, we have stated the attitudes or self-assessments of students' use of selected soft skills. We found that students use soft skills in their learning and other activities, but their use is less desirable. Education must pay more consistent attention to the development of these skills because it is

soft skills and their use in life that will be key not only for the advancement of the individual but for the advancement of the entire society. Based on our findings from the questionnaire, but also from interviews with pupils, we propose in particular:

- to develop students' communicative skills, which are beneficial for students' mutual communication;
- to lead pupils to the fact that problems are part of life, but it is necessary to perceive why they happen, what they can lead to and how best to solve them;
- to support students, to lead them to be persistent, to correctly understand reality;
- to support students in finding their way of learning and speaking, but in a way that is in line with the requirements of the school, society, morality and responsibility, etc.;
- to lead pupils to the fact that everything is solvable. The resignation is a mistake. Instead, it is necessary to find and choose the right approaches to the solution;
- to create students' interpersonal skills not only by solving tasks but also through an environment of humility and mutual respect;
- to help students to practice different roles in life, work, and management in different situations, informally teach them to cooperate with others;
- to cultivate a sense of responsibility in pupils;
- to create opportunities for students to speak, listen, plan, organise, etc.;
- to teach students, age-appropriately, what social-emotional intelligence is and what its importance is in human life;
- to encourage them to look for opportunities to be tenacious and resilient, but at the same time responsible to themselves and others;
- to create as many opportunities as possible to convince them of the importance and benefits of mutual cooperation;
- to lead pupils to be able to admit their mistakes, but also to learn from them,
- to support pupils' self-confidence;
- to convince students of their unique individual abilities and skills, which they should use for their development.

The following is only a brief calculation resulting from our pilot study findings, which we will address in the coming months.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The contribution is processed as part of the solution to the research task KEGA 012-4/2022. Safety of the school environment - a new challenge for the development of selected competencies of primary and secondary school teachers as well as the partial results from Erasmus plus project 2022-SK01-SCH-KA122-000095823 (With Education to Plurilingualism).

## REFERENCES

- [1] Benner, T. (2023). *Sozialkompetenz entwickeln: 77 Kooperationsspiele zur Förderung der Soft Skills. 2.- 4. Klasse*. Persen.
- [2] Candelier, M., Camilleri-Grima, A., Castellotti, V., de Pietro, J. Schröder-Sura F., Lörincz, I., Meissner, F. J., Schröder-Sura, A., Noguero, A., & Molinié, M. (2012). *FREPA, A Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures Competences and resources*. Council of Europe.
- [3] Fischer, D. (2022). *Future Work Skills*. Gabal.
- [4] Huber, M., & Krause, S. (2018). *Bildung und Emotion*. Springer.
- [5] Horkun, K. (2019). Soft skills development as the number one priority for the 21st century. *Topical Issues of Humanities, Technical and Natural Sciences*, 142-145.
- [6] Gueck, G. (2011). *Professionelle Intelligenz: Worauf es morgen ankommt*. Eichborn Verlag.
- [7] Education Section of the UNICEF Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean. (2022). *The 12 Transferable Skills from UNICEF's Conceptual and Programmatic Framework*. United Nations Children's Fund. <https://www.unicef.org/lac/media/31591/file/The%2012%20Transferable%20Skills.pdf>
- [8] Lah, M. (2022). The professional skills of future language teachers: The case of Slovenian students. *XLinguae*, 15(4), 38-48. <https://doi.org/10.18355/XL.2022.15.04.04>
- [9] Petlák, E. (2022). Sociálne a emocionálne učenie - jeho podstata a prínos pre život [Social and emotional learning - its basis and contribution for life]. *Didaktika*, 4(3), 2-6.
- [10] Reicher, H. (2010). *Sozial-emotionales Lernen im Kontext inklusiver Pädagogik: Potenziale und Perspektiven*. Grazer Universitätsverlag Leykam.
- [11] Toro, E., & Kisi, A. (2022). Digital literacy, a necessary skill for training language teachers in Albania. *XLinguae*, 15(4), 3-17. <https://doi.org/10.18355/XL.2022.15.04.01>