| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Contextualizing Transversal Competences: Outcomes, Moroccan Students as a Case-Study

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| ABSTRACT

Recent educational reforms in Morocco have highlighted the importance of soft skills integration into the Moroccan educational system. This implementation, however, has triggered debates over its effectiveness considering the practical challenges it has been proven to encounter. This paper discusses a series of outcomes generated from a year of teaching soft skills to Licence d'Excellence students. It addresses a series of variables that are fundamental to the successful inclusion of soft skills in the Moroccan curricula. As such, this paper employs an explanatory sequential design based on the use of questionnaires and focus groups. The findings revealed important data. A contextualization process as to what skills are important in what contexts is a crucial procedure considering the various definitions and frameworks of soft skills. Second, the current educational reforms have paid little attention to the provision of the adequate teaching staff responsible for teaching soft skills. Professors of literature and cultural studies, for instance, may exhibit comparatively less efficacy than those with expertise in soft skills. Other variables namely students' language proficiency, teaching methods, coordination between the relevant stakeholders were revealed to have considerable impact on the success of these educational reforms. This paper then discusses a comprehensive set of ingredients that could nurture decision-making in this context.

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1. Introduction

This paper argues that the debate on soft skills extends beyond their mere integration in the Moroccan educational system. Given the various definitions of soft skills, the discussion focuses instead on what skills matter in what contexts. The aim of the current study revolves around justifying the contextualization of soft skills teaching and learning. In other words, no specific definition is universally valid nor should a framework be adopted for its esteemed efficacy. Contextualizing suggests that students' needs should come first and foremost consideration taken of the requirements of university programs. This paper also generates conclusions regarding vital ingredients that contribute to the success of soft skills learning and teaching. In addition to contextualization, students' language proficiency, the importance of experiential learning in the acquisition of soft skills, and the necessity of recruiting PhD holders specialized in teaching these skills are proven to be important factors that should be taken into account in educational reforms. As such, this paper aims to answer one main research question represented as follows:

- How does a one-year implementation of soft skills instruction shape students' abilities compared to their initial skillset, and what conclusions can be drawn from this pedagogical experience?

This research question encompasses two research objectives; exploring the outcomes generated from teaching soft skills to Moroccan EFL learners with the aim of highlighting the importance of contextualizing the learning process, and examining the variables that contribute to the success of this experience.

2. Literature review

2.1 Defining Transversal Competences: Context over Definition

There have been various endeavors to define transversal competences; all of which refer to the concept as the quality of acquiring a set of skills that is required to function effectively within a professional context. The term competence per see has been defined by Eraut (2003) as the ability to perform the tasks and roles required to the expected results. McClelland (1973) refers to the concept as a sum of knowledge, skills and aptitudes which contributes to the capacity of a person to effectively perform the duties and responsibilities associated to the job. These definitions limit the term competence to a package of specific cognitive abilities that are related to the accomplishment of a task. However, Arnold and Schussler's (2001) definition of competence extends this limitation and considers that competence is rather an individual's ability for action, in a more holistic view that includes not only specific knowledge and competences but also core and general abilities. In the same vein, Mandon and Sulzer (2001) advance that competence needs to be understood as knowledge, abilities, and qualities in action. Therefore, these two definitions involve social abilities and personal qualities in the definition of the concept of competence.

In this regard, two sets of competences have been identified: technical or specific competences, also referred to by Balcar et. al (2014) by professional competences which are applicable only in the environment for which they were developed. General or transversal competences are referred to as skills that can be applicable in any professional context regardless of where they were attained (Serpa et. al, 2018). They are appropriate to any environment because they encompass life and social skills that allow individuals to deal intelligently, efficiently and effectively within their professions. Examples of such competences include adaptability, autonomy, responsibility, social interaction as well as personal and professional development. The Bruxelles Formation (2017) classifies the aforementioned skills as methodological, social and constitutional.

However, what remains in our view at the core of this discussion is the controversy that is made within the conceptualizations of transversal competences and their applicability to different contexts. Different scholars point out to different skills, either at the expense of other competences, or because of their esteemed importance within a specific field. This means that there can be no prevailing definition to the concept or a preferred classification over another one. On a wider perspective, in discussing the EU's efforts in reforming education, Abrantes et. al (2022) found that there can be no prevailing model of education and training policies. Similarly, the UNESCO considers transversal competences as an open concept that cannot be defined and operationalized in the same way. This means that the holistic approach[1] to the concept of transversal competences cannot be taken for granted nor can it serve as a theoretical background to all the research produced in the field.

Literature confirms this hypothesis. A study of the University of Porto revealed that students expressed interest to specific transversal competences at the expense of others (Barros, 2019). It was found that social sciences, commerce and law students mostly value communication, interpersonal and planning skills, while STEM students prioritize problem-solving, innovation, ICT and subject-specific skills (APA, 2019). Similarly, the findings of a large project involving some Portuguese universities revealed that some transversal skills such as analysis and problem-solving, creativity and innovation, adaptation and flexibility as well as planning and organization were ranked above subject-specific skills, both in recent graduates and employers views of the most valued skills for the labour market in the next five years. In Morocco, Aziz et. al (2022) found in conducting a study on Moroccan educators' perceptions on the most important soft skills that, general communication, oral communication, problem solving, critical thinking, teamwork and professionalism, and strong work ethic as the top five competences to be integrated in Moroccan universities' curricula. The studies mentioned enhance our point of view; that which underlines the necessity of considering the context in which transversal competences are to be acquired and operationalized.

Therefore, no specific definition of the ones that are discussed in literature is serving as a theoretical background for this paper. We consider that transversal competences are the non-technical life skills that are necessary for an efficient and effective management of tasks within a professional context. The importance of certain transversal skills over others is therefore highly contextual and can only be determined as a response to the needs of the environment in which students, graduates and employers are operating.

2.2 Transversal Competences in Moroccan Higher Education

The debate over the importance of transversal competences starts primarily by defining what the concerned actors do/should do in order to ensure a smooth and effective inclusion of these skills into university curricula. Pressure is exercised on national governments in order to shape and align their agendas with international standards (Abrantes, 2019). However, contextuality

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[1] The holistic approach in this regard refers to defining transversal competences through encompassing all the skills that are not professional/technical in the category of « transversal competences » as if they were applicable and essential in all the contexts.

also imposes itself in this regard as no educational model can take place obstruction made of social, cultural, economic and political contexts (APA, 2019). This debate includes not only the education reforms made for a successful inclusion of soft skills within universities curricula but should be extended to encompass another important variable related to the coordinated efforts of the stakeholders concerned with these educational reforms.

In this regard, the mission of Higher Education Institutes should be re-defined from institutions that train yearly graduates in different fields; graduates that are sooner required to have access to the labour market consideration taken of the potential difficulties they may face, to institutions that are rather partially responsible for how well and how smooth this access is to the professional world. Jose. Sa et.al (2018) says in this regard that,

> "In order for HEIs to be able to promote, develop and equip their students with transversal competences, change is required at their macro, meso and micro levels and involves a large set of variables, namely expectations, regulations, formal, non-formal and informal learning, the definition of transversal competences and the curriculum and its implementation, the academic and teacher culture, the institution's relationship with the stakeholders, a teaching process that ascribes the student a more active role and the use of new technologies and forms of assessment" (p: 5).

This quote justifies our stance. Expectations, regulations, forms of learning, the definition of transversal competences, the implementation of the curriculum as well as the teaching methods are variables that are directly connected to contextuality. These factors are also highly dependent on how clear and multi-dimensional the educational reforms are. This means that the concerned stakeholders need to have a convergent and synchronized vision as to what the state wants, what employers need, and what Higher Education Institutes produce. A study conducted by Nicolaescu et. al (2017) revealed that students' and employers' perceptions of the importance of some transversal skills highly differed. While students estimated that decision-making and problem solving were essential, employers, from their side, considered that the use of IT technology and communication were rather more important (APA, 2017). Nicolaescu's quote suggests that synergy is important. This aligns with Jose Sa et.al (2018) stance's regarding higher education institutions and their relationship with other actors. The following figure represents and summarizes this point of view:

Figure 1: Coordination among the actors concerned about the educational reforms on transversal competences
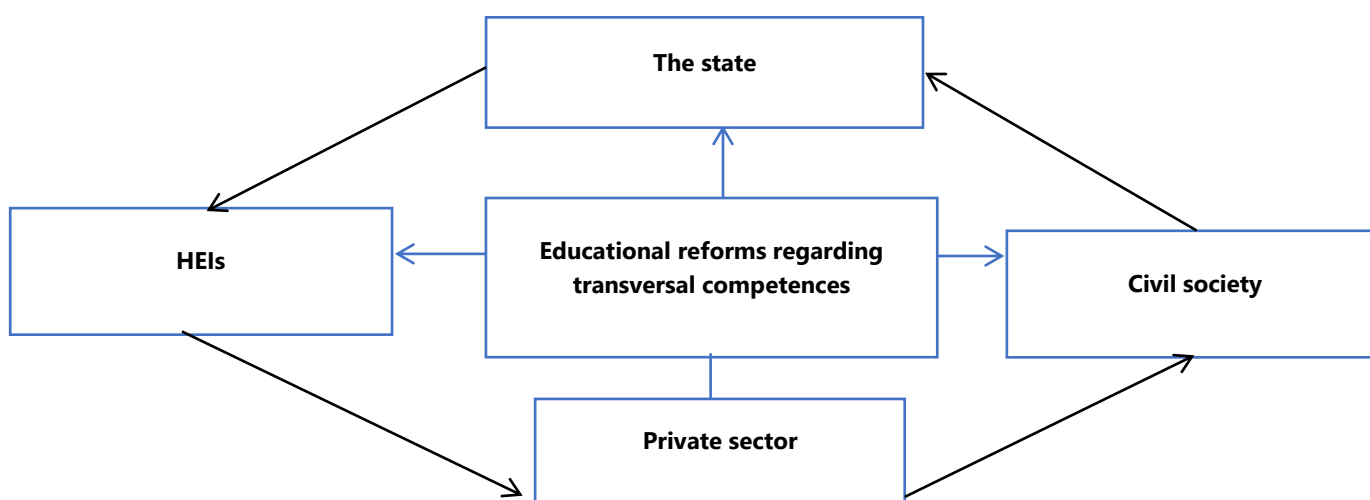
Coordination among the stakeholders concerned with the reforms related to transversal competences is showcased in the figure above. Coordination means a sort of alignment in these actors' strategic perspectives and the creation of a context in which they strategize and act accordingly. The arrows in blue refer to the equal engagement of these actors in the elaboration of effective strategies regarding the inclusion of transversal competences in educational systems. The bold arrows mean that strategizing is not enough; rather, continuous interaction and refinement of the reforms in response to the needs of the labour market is also crucial.

This importance is also represented in another variable that is often brought into discussion in the literature: the use of experiential learning in the acquisition of transversal competences. Conventional teaching methods represented in professorial

interactions namely lecturing do not gain much popularity as compared to more interactional methods. Santos Rego et. al (2022) says in this regard that,

> "If learning is focused on competences, what equally has to change is the teaching process, because social demands and needs could not be understood then as an accessory but as a central element of the academic task. Thus, the benefit of experiential activities in learning will be none other than the possibility for students to take collective actions, but with specific and immediate goals, as well as to interactively and collaboratively participate with people who already have a certain level of competence" (p: 7).

Experiential learning signifies that students will be asked to practice the knowledge they have acquired in class. This starts from simple role play or case studies to internships or extracurricular activities held within or outside the university. Santos Rego (2022) explains in this regard that the relevance of experiential learning in transversal competences is represented in placing the student in a professional context which introduces the feeling of competence, involvement, commitment, and responsibility. These declarations are extracted from the social learning theory that emphasizes the sociability of learning transversal competences, thus the importance of interpersonal relationships (Santos Rego, et. al, 2022).

This discussion should not exclude the most essential variable related to educational reforms in general and to transversal competences in particular. Human resources represented in faculty members who are aware of the importance of transversal competences is considerably important. Generally, transversal competences can be implicitly transmitted to students and improved in class without necessarily planning it. In courses like Oral Communication, Public Speaking, and Spoken English[2] in the Moroccan context for instance, students are continuously required to deliver presentations in class. They are also taught to plan their speeches, design presentations using ICT, and other relevant activities which enable them to improve at various levels. However, the latest educational reform in Morocco, PACTE ESRI 2030 indicates that specific courses should be designed exclusively for transversal competences (ICMED, n.d). This requires, to our view, faculty members that are specialized in teaching soft skills as compared to professors whose fields of research diverge; literature, cultural studies, theoretical linguistics…etc. Santo Rego et. al (2022) confirms this stance. The authors consider that the mobilization of resources in the context of procedurally shared cultures practices is primordial. Resources are referred to as all that is shared and exchanged by all the participants while making explicit the value of cooperation and teamwork dynamics (APA, 2022). Resources then can be financial and human. The mobilization of the latter hence means training staff that able to carry out such missions adequately and appropriately.

PACTE ESRI 2030 has come up with considerable solutions to the aforesaid issues. In addition to scientific research, the reform has placed at the heart of higher education the centrality of soft skills. Aware of their importance as compared to hard skills, PACTE ESRI 2030 has brought the following changes;

-   The creation of transversal departments within Moroccan faculties;
-   The inclusion of power skills modules;
-   The certification in foreign languages;
-   The establishment of Licence d'Excellence programs

PACTE ESRI also stresses the necessity of recruiting PhD holders whose fields align with the state's vision and strategy regarding the inclusion of soft skills in Moroccan higher education (ICMED, n.d).

2.3 Transversal Competences: What Outcomes?

Teaching transversal competences in EFL contexts poses one main obstacle: learners' language proficiency. In this case, attention may shifted away from transversal competences to language learning which hampers the effectiveness of the class perceived impact. Therefore, in this case, transversal competences acquire a multidimensional aspect; that of a language learning class, an ESP class and a soft skills class. Indeed, a language's syntactic, semantic and pragmatic package constitutes an essential part of interculturality and this latter is an aspect of transversality; however, considering our point of view which underlines the necessity of contextualizing the learning of transversal competences, this multidimensionality becomes irrelevant. A report by the Council of Europe (2021) highlights the possibility of teaching transversal competences in a foreign language class, because, according to the report "some competences are closely linked to language learning, for example understanding how different languages can be used as a means of mediation to support understanding and learning, or how language use can affect understanding and attitude". This agrees with our stance regarding the transversal nature of foreign language learning in terms of interculturality. The report adds that in this case, i.e, in foreign language learning, not all the transversal competences can be transmitted, apart

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[2] These courses are taught to the students of the English Departments in Moroccan universities

from those that can be implicitly initiated to students such as communication as highlighted in the previous section. However, the report also mentions that language proficiency could be a barrier to the learning of transversal competences. The report says in this context that,

> "On the other hand, teachers working with learners whose level of competence in the foreign language is elementary may initially find it difficult also to include a focus on transversal competences other than those implicit in any co-operative action-oriented learning (co-operation, teamwork, listening to different viewpoints etc.), but even the difficulty of language level can be overcome if use of the first language or language of schooling is encouraged at certain points" (Council of Europe, 2021, p:4).

In Morocco, the aim of integrating transversal competences in Moroccan educational system is to have the students improve their soft skills using foreign languages; French and English, which means that our first language cannot be used in this regard. This discussion leads to the conclusion that language proficiency could be a factor or a barrier to achieving considerable outcomes regarding the transmission of transversal competences to EFL students.

A second variable that is at the heart of our discussion in this paper is the effect of transversal competences on Moroccan students. A large part of the existing literature represents this effect in increasing students' employability; that is their chances of getting a job and staying in the job (Aziz, 2023). Other studies link this impact to improving specific skills such as the ability to communicate, to adapt to different contexts or to work in teams. Santos Rego, et al (2022) for instance, found in a comparative study on first and second year students versus third and fourth year students' perceptions about the development of their competences that these latter do not differ significantly. In other words, there was no significant perceived improvement of transversal skills (entrepreneurial skills, intercultural skills, interpersonal skills, networking skills, analysis and synthesis). However, the paper's results also show that students who have participated during the course of their studies in extracurricular activities have been able to increase all the competences above-mentioned as compared to those who did not. Other students, who participated in a youth organization or voluntary action, were able to improve their entrepreneurial and interpersonal skills. Students with work experience claimed they have developed the same skills as compared to their unemployed peers.

These findings relate to the interrelationship established in previous sections between the transmission of transversal skills and experiential learning. Regarding the different students' perceptions (according to their levels) of their acquired skills, the authors indicate that universities need to invest more efforts in offering the right environment for the students to acquire the skills in question. However, Cano and Fernandez point out that these types of competences cannot be acquired in the university setting. We perceive in this paper, that indeed, these skills cannot be transmitted to students in an academic setting. That is why we highlighted the importance of experiential learning in this regard. The more students are put in a professional setting that is similar to their potential work context, the more likely they are to develop the perceived competences.
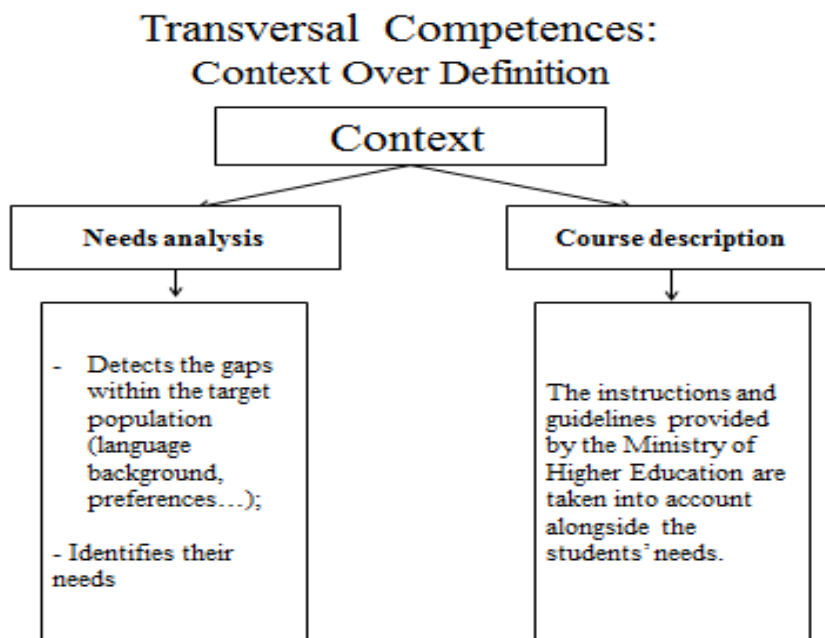
In another context, Abrantes et.al (2022) explored the impacts of transversal competences on employability. Their findings showed that there was a positive perception of transversal competences development namely analytical capacity, autonomy, and communication at the expense of other "important" competences such as digital skills, teamwork, job search skills, and social capital (APA, 2022). As far as employability is concerned, positive impacts were witnessed in terms of internal mobility rather through job search (APA, 2022). This progress, according to the same study, may be explained by the improvement made in the bachelor's program, a wider recognition of the university in the labour market and the development of the socioeconomic context (APA, 2022). The study also found that employability was acknowledged more in students who confirm competences development (APA, 2022, p: 3). As such, a dialectical relationship between employability and transversal competences was established; the more opportunities are presented in the labour market, the more likely are graduates to develop self-confidence which in turn boosts their transversal competences and the opposite is also true.

Therefore, overall, a positive correlation has been established between transversal skills, employability and outcomes. Previous studies also confirm the effectiveness of experiential learning in transversal competences classes. In addition, agreement on the important skills to be transferred to students is also a variable of considerable importance. This requires academic coordination between and amongst the stakeholders involved and concerned with educational reforms. Distance learning was also explored by Abrantes (2022) as an essential teaching procedure in order to facilitate the learning of soft skills.

### *2.4 Transversal Competences: How to Contextualize?*
Contextualizing the teaching/ learning of transversal competences implies that students' needs are to be at the center of the process. The following figure represents the procedures conducted for the purpose of designing the course content:

Figure 2: Contextualization

Transversal Competences:
Context Over Definition

Context

Needs analysis | Course description

- Detects the gaps within the target population (language background, preferences…);

- Identifies their needs

The instructions and guidelines provided by the Ministry of Higher Education are taken into account alongside the students' needs.

Saragih (2014, as cited in Axmedovna, et.al, 2019) states that a needs analysis is vitally important in designing teaching materials for English for Specific Purposes. The rationale behind the use of the needs analysis in transversal competences class is to identify the needs and the gaps of the students. The needs analysis, in our case, has also enabled us to determine what teaching methods were the most appropriate for the students and for the competences selected. Also, as showcased in the figure, the contextualization process should not exclude the requirements of the bachelor program in question which also reflect the Ministry's vision in this regard.

The needs analysis was conducted via focus groups where students had to explicitly express their needs. This interaction enabled us to evaluate their ability to communicate orally in the English language. Students were also required to write paragraphs on a topic of their interest with the purpose of evaluating their language proficiency namely grammar, punctuation, vocabulary, and writing skills. We proceeded with the analysis of the data gathered and the following results were revealed:

Figure 3: Needs analysis results
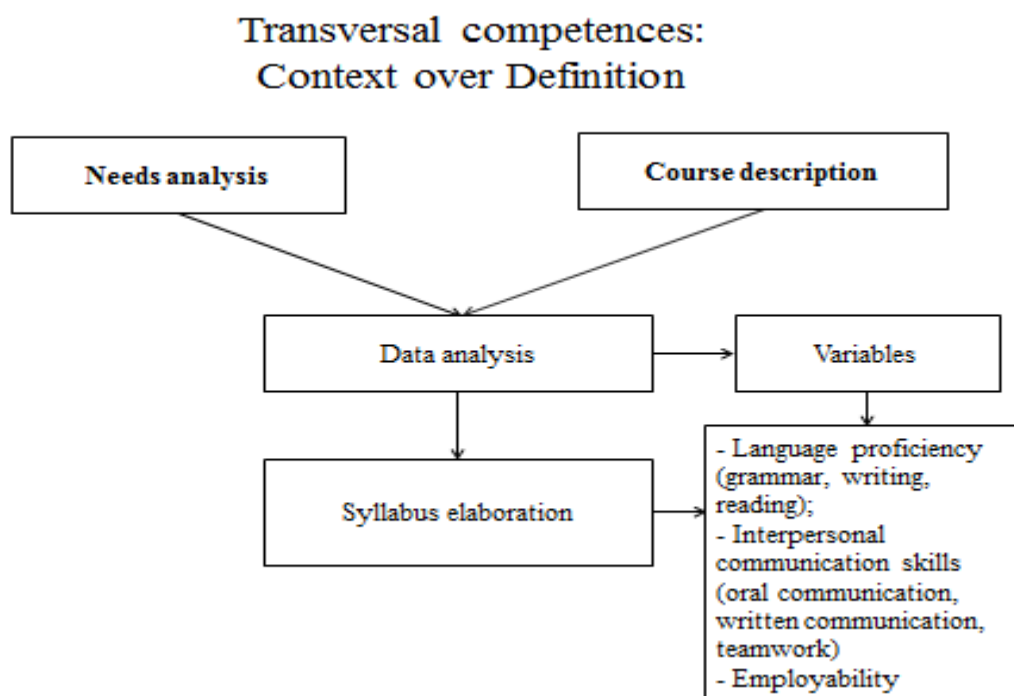
As showcased in the figure above, most students claimed to have grammar issues. This was also observed in the focus groups and in the writing activity. Some of them expressed their disability to communicate either orally or in written language because of vocabulary problems and preferred to use Arabic. Language proficiency was proven then to be an obstacle. It is also equally important to mention that few students demonstrated good language skills, oral and written communication. The needs analysis revealed that it was a mixed-abilities class. The elaboration of the course content then had to take into account multiple elements altogether to cover and amplify the gaps detected. In addition to grammar, students expressed their willingness to improve their interpersonal communication skills namely oral and written communication, teamwork, and mostly elevate their English use within their field of specialty which would facilitate their employability after graduation.

3. Methodology
3.1 Research design, methodology, and methods
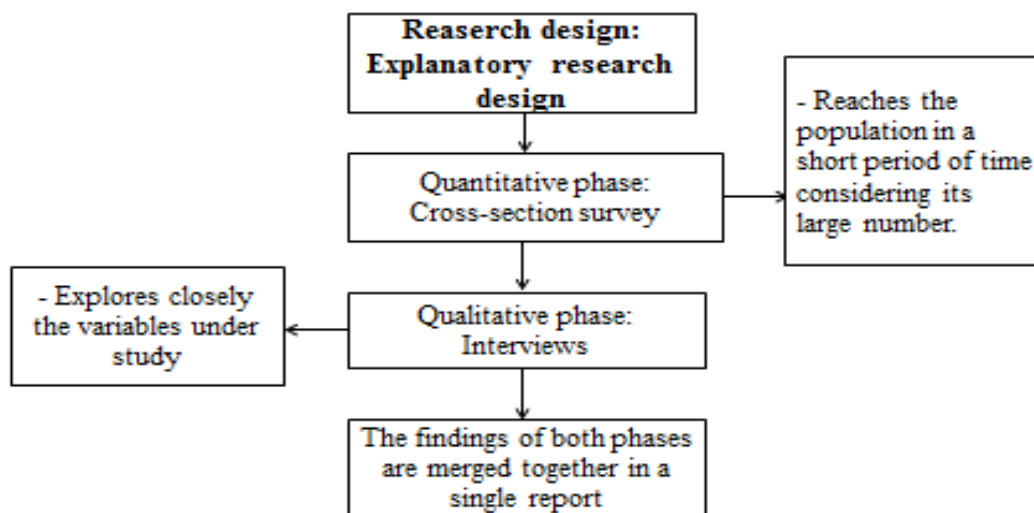
This paper is exploratory in nature; however, it has adopted the explanatory research design that starts with a survey used in this regard to reach the population understudy. Focus groups are conducted in the second phase as face to face interactions allow researchers to dive deeper in the variables that popped in the first phase. According to Creswell (2009), the explanatory sequential strategy is characterized by the collection and analysis of quantitative data in a first phase of research followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data in a second phase that builds on the results of the initial quantitative results (p: 194). Creswell (2009) adds that an explanatory strategy allows explaining and interpreting quantitative results by collecting and analyzing follow-up qualitative data (p: 194).

3.2 Sampling
The participants in this research are students of a Bachelor program at a Moroccan University. The students are required to complete a 15 hours class online on Rosetta STONE in which they mostly work on English grammar. Another set of 15 hours of soft skills class is to be completed in face to face learning at the university. The data collection occurred at the end of the second semester. Purposive sampling was used in this regard since the students align with the aims of this research. All the students (64) were approached using the questionnaire; 6 of them were interviewed in a focus group.

3.3 Structure of the questionnaire
The survey used in this study was a self-developed questionnaire designed to fit the purpose of this research. It is composed of three sections; skills self-assessment which goal is to have the participants auto-evaluate the extent to which they have been able to improve their language proficiency and the other selected transversal competences. The second section "impact on life and work path" explores the effect of the transversal skill class on students' employability. The third section "future prospects" examines the students' opinions regarding the use of distance learning in the teaching of soft skills and the role of experiential learning in this regard.

3.4 Data analysis procedures:
The survey in question is composed of open-ended and multiple choice questions. Descriptive statistics using percentages and pie charts will be used in the presentation of the quantitative data. The results of the semi-structured interviews will be analyzed using thematic analysis and will be instrumentalized in the interpretation of the quantitative data. The findings of both phases will be merged in one single report.

4. Findings and discussion

The first section of the questionnaire aimed to enable the respondents to self-assess their skills through the use of dichotomous questions. The focus group; however, employed open-ended questions in order to gain a profound understanding of the responses.

When asked about the extent to which students were able to improve their English following the soft skills class, the majority of the respondents, that is, the equivalent of 56,9 % claimed to have made a moderate progress in the language, 11,8% claim to have made excellent progress, while 5,9% reported having achieved minimal improvement. In another question, most participants (33, 3%) claim to have improved their communication, writing and reading skills equally as compared to those who went for either of the skills separately.

The next question of the survey highlighted other areas of improvement *"the class helped me communicate", "I have acquired pronunciation skills", "communication: listening and speaking clearly, writing effectively, and working with others to achieve common goals",* and *"I have learnt to read and understand sentences in English",* among others. In the same context, a focus group participant noted that:

> *"I think the class has mostly helped me with grammar; I had problems in using tenses like the simple present, simple past, regular, irregular verbs. After having been introduced to their rules, I now master the basic grammar rules that are required for communicating in the English language. I have also been able to improve my writing skills; writing topic sentences, supporting details, concluding sentence as well. Therefore, I believe there has been a quite satisfying improvement in terms of grammar and writing as compared to my level prior to taking the English class".*

In the same vein, another respondent claimed that:

> *"It is all about grammar, I have been able to get acquainted to regular and irregular verbs, count and uncount nouns, subject-verb agreement and tenses. For us, it is just the beginning because we feel the need to learn more".*

As can clearly be observed, the majority of the answers revolved around language skills, that is, communication (speaking), writing and reading. This is due to the fact that our respondents formed a mixed-abilities class in terms of language proficiency; therefore, emphasis was rather put on the linguistic more than the technical side of the class. It is worth mentioning that some students were not able to speak English. In the previous question of the survey, some students underlined that they have not benefitted from the class by inserting "nothing" as a response.

These findings concur with our discussion in the previous sections. As mentioned in the literature review[3], the report by the Council of Europe highlighted the possibility of teaching soft skills indirectly in a foreign language class such as interculturality. When students are enabled to communicate in the target language, they are also, unconsciously trained to think in that language, as the teaching of a language also encompasses the transmission of the culture of that language. However, this should not stand as a barrier to the improvement of other "critical" and more complicated skills namely critical thinking, problem-solving, and others. Indeed, this was not possible in our class since the students' language proficiency made it extremely challenging for us to secure the acquisition of other skills namely those mentioned in the course description. In this regard, the report by the Council of Europe also underlined that in case of mixed-abilities classes, language may pose a problem and recourse can be made to the first language. The report mentions that:

> *"On the other hand, teachers working with learners whose level of competence in the foreign language is elementary may initially find it difficult also to include a focus on transversal competences other than those implicit in any co-operative action-oriented learning (co-operation, teamwork, listening to different viewpoints etc.), but even the difficulty of language level can be overcome if use of the first language or language of schooling is encouraged at certain points"* (Council of Europe, 2021, p:4).

As we have mentioned in the literature review, our first language (Arabic) cannot be used in this regard since the goal of the class is to have our students communicate in the English language. Therefore, contextualization has made us take as a starting point the decision of working on the four skills rather than tackeling what is more complex than language teaching. However, we

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[3] Section 1.3

also think that most of the students were partially able to develop skills namely oral communication and teamwork through pair works and workshops organized in class.

In the second section of the questionnaire "Impacts on life and work path", students were asked about whether the class enabled them to use spoken and written English in relation to their field of specialty. Most respondents answered "yes" to both questions while 68, 6% claimed that the class has equipped them with the prerequisites required in their professional field. The focus group findings revealed the same. As the majority of our respondents are currently master students, they are required to produce a research paper in relation to their field of specialty in the English language. Our respondents claimed that they now are able to do research in English. Some of them stated that the class has boosted their employability and their visibility internationally. In the same vein, a focus group participant adds that:

> "*English has become the important language in all professional fields. On a personal level, the soft skills class has helped me communicate in English especially when having to participate in international conferences or when meeting tourists and migrants here in Morocco. When you master the grammar of a language, you sound more professional and more fluent. Also, I feel that I can look for references in the English language that are related to our field*".

Similarly, another participant argued that:

> "*Since most of the material used in class was related to our professional field, we have benefitted from keywords related to our discipline which has facilitated our integration in the labour market let alone the mastery of the English grammar that has facilitated our oral fluency. There has been a considerable and huge improvement in our level of the english language*".

In the qualitative data collection process, the participants repeatedly made reference to their language proficiency when asked about employability and accessibility to the labour market. Also, most participants did not mention a direct perceived impact on their employability as the majority of them decided to pursue a Master's degree after their graduation. That is, when asked about employability, students only made reference to the class's impact on their communication skills and their linguistic capacities in securing internships and building networks rather than for instance securing a job. Nevertheless, the participants who are already functional witnessed internal mobility as compared to their unemployed peers. These findings corroborate with the results of Abrantes's et. al (2022) study in relation to internal mobility and job search. Abrantes et. al (2022) also mention that employability was acknowledged more in students who demonstrate competence development. This is also true in our case as the students who were employed prior to joining the program have more learning tendencies which positively affects their visibility. It is also worth mentioning that students whose language proficiency did not meet the requirements of the class mentioned no perceived development vis-à-vis their professional careers. The same students were not able to keep up with the class courses.

Experiential learning is another variable that was explored in the data collection process of both phases. Most of the participants (98%) claimed that experiential learning in the form of community service; activities within the university in general and in class per see have boosted the acquisition of soft skills. Indeed, most of the activities performed in class took the form of role plays, group work and workshops. For instance, after a grammar class where students are introduced to a verb tense; they are asked to form pairs where a situation is imagined (restaurant customer vs. waiter for instance). Students are given the time to produce a conversation and are then asked to act it out on stage. These types of activities allow the students to simultaneously practice their grammar through orally performing their conversations. This should as well improve other skills namely oral communication, teamwork, and problem solving. In this regard, one of the participants states that;

> "*Experiential learning has enabled us to bring all the knowledge we have acquired in class into practice. We think that soft skills acquisition is better achieved through role plays, case studies and group projects. In our case, having done role plays, we have become less shy and more confident in using English in spoken language*".

In the same vein, another participant adds that: "*Having to do the role plays per see has enabled me on a personal level to do brainstorming both in finding solutions to the proposed problems and using the English language, which was not possible prior to this class*". A third participant confirms the effectiveness of experiential learning in soft skills acquisition by stating that: "*Soft skills are better acquired through role plays. I personally had problems being on stage and speaking English, I have started to gain self-confidence*". Other participants stressed the importance of student-centered approaches in the learning process which according to them have boosted their learning autonomy and self-regulation skills. Our findings concur with the ones discussed in the

literature review. Santos Rego et.al (2022) state the importance of adopting new unconventional teaching methods and the benefit of experiential learning as a central element of the academic task.

Santos Rego et. al (2022) also mentioned the importance of experiential learning in the form of extracurricular activities and professional settings. The authors discuss the sociability of learning transversal competences and the importance of establishing interpersonal relationships which can be achieved through experiential learning. The findings of the focus groups revealed the same results. As our participants had the opportunity throughout the Bachelor program to organize and take part in extracurricular activities within the university and enroll internships outside their institution, they claimed a positive impact on their soft skills. A participant mentioned in this regard that: "*I had the opportunity to engage in an internship at a national organization in Morocco in which I was enabled to put my knowledge into real professional settings. Internships also allow one to widen their network which opens new horizons*". Other respondents stated the following:

P 1: "*The starting point was in the soft skills class, and internships allowed us to put what we've learnt into practice";*

P 2: "*Since I am already an employee, I think soft skills have allowed me to look for other opportunities which have increased job search and also promotion within my current job".*

P 3:"*I haven't had the opportunity to start an internship in my field of study but being able to start an internship anyway has enabled me to get rid of social fear, communicate with others, improve teamwork and adaptability, and enlarge my network".*

However, the adoption of unconventional methods necessitates the recruitment of human resources that are specialized in the field as compared to the traditional teaching methods that are used at the university level. Santos Rego et. al (2022) confirms this stance as the authors consider that mobilization of resources is primordial to the success of transversal skills classes. Also, Aziz et. al (2023) found in their study that university professors may not be qualified to teach these skills. Their participants suggested that coaches and mentors are most likely to succeed these missions. In the same context, PACTE ESRI (2030) has made the same recommendations regarding new generations of PhD holders.

Literature also mentions the importance of distance learning in the acquisition of soft skills. Abrantes (2022), for instance, stressed the effectiveness of online learning in facilitating the learning of soft skills. The findings of the survey revealed that the majority of the participants (52, 9%) claimed that both distance and face to face learning are beneficial in this regard. In the same vein, the findings of the focus group carried out with the same participants revealed that each learning mode is relevant for different purposes. According to the respondents, distance learning may be beneficial in teaching grammar and other technical linguistic skills while face-to-face learning is considered the most effective in developing soft skills such as oral communication and other skills that necessitate the physical presence of a mentor. Participants mentioned the following:

- P1: "*Face to face is more beneficial, we think that online learning is a bit boring. If you happen to make a mistake, in face to face learning, the professor is there to correct you, unlike online learning*".
- P2: "*Face to face learning enables the organization of workshops, unlike online learning*".
- P3: "*Online learning was not effective at all. Face to face learning helps with everything, nothing replaces face to face interactions*".

It is worth mentioning that the Ministry has launched an online platform "ROSETTA" in which students need to complete 15 hours of language learning. Online courses mostly revolve around grammar, reading and writing. As previously discussed, learning a language also encompass acquiring its culture, and interculturality is an aspect of transversality, especially in today's world where cultural sensitivity is a required ingredient in the globalized labour market. However, our respondents prefer face to face learning where the acquisition of skills such public speaking, teamwork, problem solving are better developed. Most of them also prefer face to face interactions in learning English grammar.

In the last part of the data collection process, respondents were approached regarding the contextualization of soft skills classes. Participants argue that the learning of soft skills is rather a gradual process as the acquisition of some skills rests on the learning of some other basic competences. In this context, our participants added that:

- P1: "*The learning of some skills requires the prior acquisition of others. How can a student practice their oral communication in the English language without mastering the language? In our case, it was mandatory for us to do it the way it was done before actually moving to soft skills*".
- P2: "*The teacher needs to take into account the needs of every student and act accordingly; otherwise, the class will be just useless*".

Other participants claimed that the class responded to their needs the way it was handled. At the beginning of the year, we made sure the students understand that a needs analysis was to be performed in order to generate an effective course syllabus. Our respondents claimed to have improved in the English language in terms of grammar, oral communication, and teamwork from 1% to 20%, others believe that the acquisition and the development of these skills is rather a long process that requires targeted efforts for great results to be achieved.

The findings of this paper highlight the importance of contextualizing the learning of soft skills rather than attributing a single and standard definition to the practice. In our case, facing several definitions of the concept with some ascribing more importance to some skills at the expense of others, we perceived that contextualization could rather be achieved through performing a needs analysis. A transversal skills class can be treated in the same way of an ESP class in order to frame, limit and target specific skills to be developed. Delimitation enables an efficient and effective instrumentalization of resources. This finding concurs with our discussion in the literature review. Abrantes (2022) argued that there can be no prevailing definition to the concept of transversal competences; the UNESCO stated that the concept cannot be defined and operationalized in the same way in different environments, Aziz et. al (2022) found that skills such as general communication, oral communication, teamwork, and problem solving were ranked as the most important skills to Moroccan university students.

5. Conclusion

The findings discussed in this paper are the result of a one year experience teaching soft skills to Bachelor students. As such, this paper serves a dual objective; justifying the importance of contextualization in approaching soft skills, and discussing the most important ingredients, to our view, in the success of teaching soft skills.

To contextualize means that no specific definition or framework, however popular or effective, can be applicable in all contexts and at all times. In this regard, this paper argues that a soft skills class should be treated as an ESP class, enabling a large margin for maneuver in response for students' needs. An important variable supports this view; students' language proficiency. It was revealed that, prior to starting the class, students' English proficiency was rather an obstacle to the learning of soft skills. Therefore, a large part of the course syllabus was dedicated to language learning, which in turn helped with skills such as communication in its both forms; written and oral. As such, this paper advances that in case of mixed abilities classes, the teaching and learning of soft skills becomes more challenging.

As far as the second objective is concerned, this paper argues that a number of factors could contribute to the success of soft skill classes. Given the complex nature of soft skills teaching, suitable and appropriate staff needs to be recruited for the teaching of such competences. This paper also stresses the importance of experiential learning represented in extracurricular activities taking place outside the class. We highlight the importance of institutional coordination in this regard in order to respond to the needs of the labour market. Higher education institutes should provide training programs that will allow graduates to secure positions after their graduation, the private sector and civil society are expected to facilitate internship opportunities to students and new graduates to enable a smooth integration in the labour market, under the orchestration of the state. For this to take place effectively, continuous communication and coordination between the involved actors is required.

Conflicts of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
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