American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research (AJHSSR)
e-ISSN : 2378-703X
Volume-08, Issue-05, pp-73-80
www.ajhssr.com
Research Paper Open Access

Towards Developing Students' Soft Skills The Case of ENSAM Students

EL Mansouri Hassan
Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Arts et Métiers (ENSAM), Moulay Ismail University-Meknes.Morocco

ABSTRACT: Building students' soft skills has started to gain ground within the realm of higher education in Morocco. However, the development of these skills requires a real-life context which simplifies their learning. In this regard, the present study is mainly conducted to investigate the effect of the out-group collaborative learning method on the development of students' soft skills. Data for the study comes from 20 semester two students at "Ecole Nationale Superieure d'Arts et Metiers" (ENSAM), Moulay Ismail University, Meknes, by implementing a one-group pretest-posttest research design. The qualitative and quantitative findings confirm that there is a statistically significant difference between the pretest and posttest results. Therefore, the adopted treatment, the out-group collaborative learning method, has improved students' communication, adaptability and presentation delivery skills. The findings of this study can be useful for future studies and give language teachers insights into the importance of using the out-group collaborative learning method in their teaching of the soft skills.

KEYWORDS : *collaborative learning, soft-skills, out-group collaborative learning method*

I. INTRODUCTION

Recently, the teaching of English for specific purposes (ESP) in Moroccan universities has started to emphasize the importance of developing students' soft skills. These non-technical skills include team-working, communication, time-management, flexibility, creativiy, emotional intelligence, adaptability and other skills (Andrews & Higson, 2008[1]; Goleman, 1998[2]; Klaus, 2007[3]; Robles, 2012[4]). This interest in soft skills' development is due to their being increasingly demanded in the world of communication and business (Nealy, 2005 [5]). To respond to this need, English language teachers have undoubtedly tried to seek suitable teaching methods and activities in order to help their students acquire and improve their soft skills.

In this regard, collaborative learning-based activities where students are exposed to different problem-solving situations can create a good environment for soft skills development (England, Nagel, & Salter, 2020[6]). Solving problems collaboratively does not only stimulate student-student interaction to express ideas and exchange information, but it also encourages them to use and share their soft skills (Ozer, 2004[7]; Edens, 2000[8]; Major and Palmer, 2001[9]). When students work together, they implicitly expose each other to a variety of soft skills which facilitate and encourage their engagement and communication. However, if teachers ask their students to stay in their groups and work with the same members for a long time, their soft skills will remain limited and lack development. That is to say, when the students are encouraged to change their groups and work with new members, they can understand and improve their soft skills better. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the effect of the out-group collaborative learning method on the development of students' *communication, adaptability, and presentation delivery skills*. These three important soft skills have been observed as the main areas which lack development in students' learning.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Social and classroom groups are two important environments where collaboration is required for the development of communication and other soft skills (Mercer,2008 [10] ; Wells ,2007[11]) . Naturally speaking, humans engage in life activities and learn how to act and behave with others in their social groups (Marcela & Castro, 2017[12]) . It is through their collaboration that they succeed in exchanging and building up their social skills (Johnson & Johnson, 2009[13]). This social collaborative environment has inspired classroom practices as it has been found that students can learn better when they are actively involved in collaborative learning activities (Murphy, Mahoney, Chen, Mendoza-Diaz & Yang, 2005[14]).

One of the main advantages of creating a collaborative environment in the classroom is that it helps the students to develop the skills and abilities of participation and collaboration (Blowers, 1998[15]). This collaborative environment also provides incompetent students with an oppotunity to team up with more capable ones

(Vygotsky, 1978[16]). When students interact and negotiate information collaboratively, they share different skills (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 1995[17]) and develop their mental functions such as thinking and reasoning (Wertsch & Rogoff, 1984[18]). Thus, one of the main reasons for creating collaborative situations is to help and urge students to use their soft skills to engage effectively in solving problems.(Anderson et al., 2017[19]; Durocher et al., 2016[20]; Grossman & Johnson, 2017[21]).

However, the development of students' soft skills may not be achieved if the students always work with the same members in their formed groups. They need to go beyond the borders of what they know within their groups to what they have not yet; or still thought about (Fisher, 2019[22]). To do so, the students need to be encouraged to leave their firstly established groups and team up with new members in a different group. In this context, the out-group collaborative learning method is a classroom practice which can help students vary their experiences regarding the learning of soft skills.

Unlike the in-group situation, where students do not change their firstly established groups and become very familiar with each other because they have kept working together for a long time, the out-group situation allows the students to keep changing their groups so that they can work with different members and exchange new skills and abilities (Ashcraft & Treadwell, 2008). Also, when students are encouraged to leave their firstly established group, in-group, to team up with other members in a new group, out-group, they implicitly reflect on their used soft skills and develop them (Christensen et al., 2018[23]; Shawver, 2020[24]; Zedda et al., 2017[25]).

III. THE REASON FOR THE OUT GROUP COLLABORATIVE LEARNING METHOD

Although the in-group situation, keeping students in their same groups, is useful because it helps the students to work together, exchange ideas and communicate to solve problems (Fiechtner & Davis, 1985[26]), it does not encourage them to explore other soft skills. When members of a group work together for a long time, they become very limited to their shared skills and abilities. To put it differently, this in-group situation deprives students from learning new skills and reflecting on the ones they have already used. Hence, helping students to cross the borders of the in-group situation to develop their soft skills requires allowing them to experience a different situation (CIPD, 2010[27]).

The out-group collaborative learning method aims to help students to explore, rethink and develop their soft skills. By staying in their firstly formed groups and work with the same members for a long time, the students' soft skills will not change. They need to team up with new members to create new groups. By working with different members in their newly established groups, the student will start questioning, comparing and reflecting on the skills they have learnt in their first groups, in-groups. The new experience and feedback which the students will receive in their new groups, out-groups, will help them reshape and improve their soft skills.

IV. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Research hypothesis

There is no significant statistical difference between the pre-test and posttest results. And so there is no effect of the out-group collaborative learning method, as an adopted treatment, on the development of the following soft skills: *communication, adaptability, and presentation delivery skills.*

4.2. Research question

Is there any significant statistical difference between the pretest and posttest results? If so, does the out-group collaborative learning method improve the students' *communication, adaptability, and presentation delivery skills?*

4.3. Research design

In order to test the effectiveness of the adopted treatment, our study uses a one-group pretest-posttest research design. The design is a type of quasi-experiment in which the performance of a non-random group of participants is measured twice: before and after exposing them to the treatment (Reichardt, 2019[28]).

4.4. Data collection instrument and procedure

Data for the study comes from two tests: a pre-test and a post-test. The tests are in the form of an evaluation checklist which targeted three soft skills: *communication, adaptability, and presentation delivery skills.* In the pre-test, the subjects of the study are asked to make four groups. Each group, in-group, is composed of five members who are asked every session to stay in their firstly established groups and work collaboratively. After one month, each subject's performance within their groups is observed and scored.

In order to test the effectiveness of the treatment, the out-group collaborative learning method, the subjects of the study are asked this time to form new groups of different members every session. They are also encouraged to work collaboratively on the tasks they are given. The process takes one month again, and then each subject's performance as regards *communication, adaptability, and presentation delivery skills* is observed and scored.

V. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

5.1.Data analysis

5.1.1.Pretest results

On the basis of the pretest qualitative results below, it appears that *adaptability and presentation delivery skills are* weaker in comparison to their *communication skill. However,* the subjects' presentation of the two skills in their pre-test is not sufficient. The results show that more than half of the subjects' scores as regards their *adaptability and presentation delivery skills* are less than 1.5/10. Also, nearly half of the subjects' scores regarding their *communication* skill are less than 2.5 / 10. Generally speaking, the pretest results demonstrate clearly that three tested soft skills constitute a difficulty for the subjects of the study.

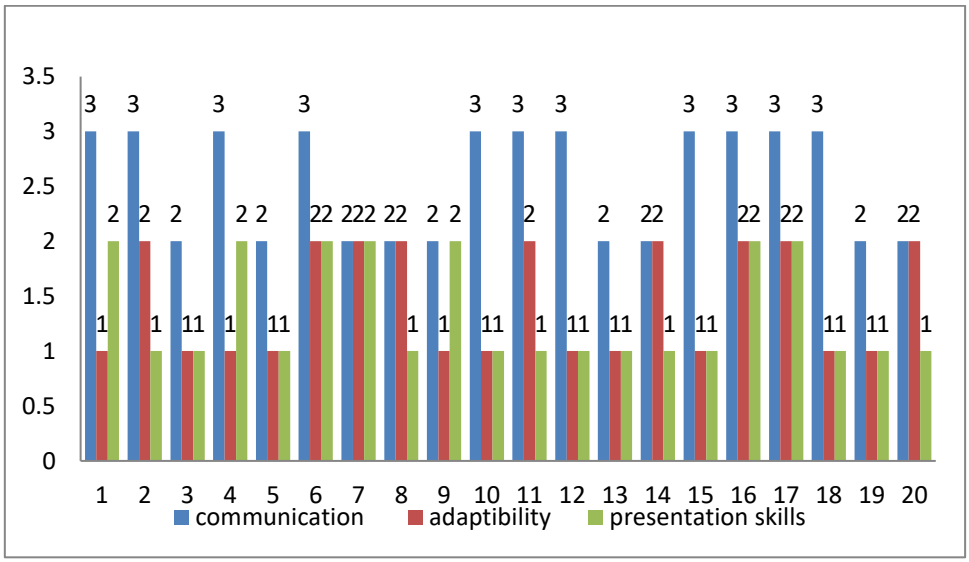

Figure 1: Pretest results

5.1.2.Post-test results

The findings of the posttest show that there is a significant difference between the subjects' pre-test and posttest results. Most of the subjects' scores as regards the three examined soft skills are more than 5/10 and others' scores are much higher. Of the three tested skills, *communication* receives the highest score (7/10); which is a good achievement because *communication* is perhaps the most fundamental and necessary soft skill. By building this ability, the students can develop other skills easily. Overall, this important difference between the pretest results and those of the posttest regarding *communication*, *adaptability,* and *presentation delivery skills* can be ascribed to the effectiveness of the adopted treatment, the out-group collaborative learning method.

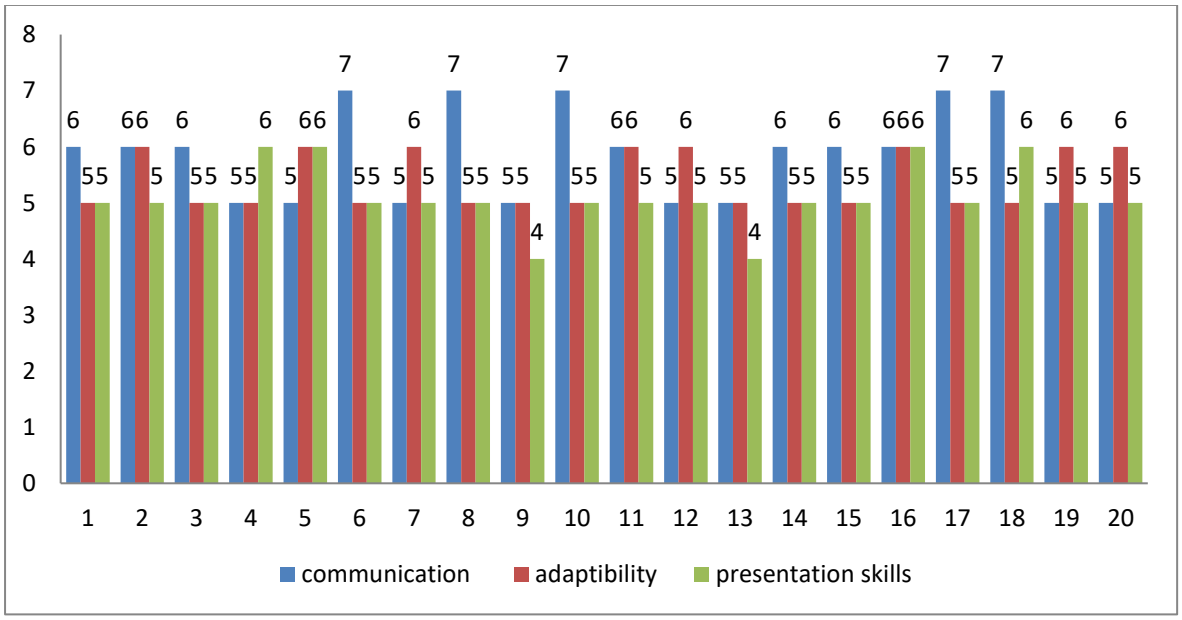

Figure 2: Posttest results

The quantitative results in tables below confirm that the subjects' *communication*, *adaptability* and *presentation delivery skills* improved due to the adopted treatment, the out-group collaborative learning method. To begin with, the statistical analysis in table 1 indicates that the sig. value (2 tailed) is less than the alpha level (.05); which confirms that there is a statistically significant difference between the subjects' pretest and posttest results as regards their *communication* soft skill.

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower	Upper			
Pair	Communication prestest Communication posttest	-3,30000	,73270	,16384	-3,64291	-2,95709	-20,142	19	,000

Table 1: Communication pretest -posttest statistical results

The statistically significant difference between the subjects' pretest and posttest results of the *communication* soft skill is confirmed by the difference in means; which is clearly shown in table 2 below:

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair	Communication pretest	2,5500	20	,51042	,11413
	Communication posttest	5,8500	20	,81273	,18173

Table 2: Communication pretest -posttest statistical results

Likewise, the statistical analysis in table 3 below shows that the sig. value (2 tailed) is less than the alpha level (.05), confirming that there is a statistically significant difference between the subjects' pretest and posttest results as regards their *adaptability* soft skill.

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Adaptability pretest Adaptability posttest	-3,95000	,60481	,13524	-4,23306	-3,66694	-29,208	19	,000

Table 3: Adaptability pretest -posttest statistical results

In table 4 below the difference in means importantly confirms the statistically significant difference between the subjects' pretest and posttest results as regards their *adaptability* soft skill.

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Adaptability pretest	1,4500	20	,51042	,11413
	Adaptability posttest	5,4000	20	,50262	,11239

Table 4: Adaptability pretest -posttest statistical results

As can be seen in table 5 below, the statistical analysis concerning the pretest and posttest results of the subjects' *presentation delivery skills* also demonstrates that the sig. value (2 tailed) is less than the alpha level (.05). This finding proves that there is a statistically significant difference between the subjects' pretest and posttest results; which can be confidently ascribed to the influence of the adopted treatment.

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower	Upper			
Pair	Presentation skills pretest Presentation skills posttest	-3,75000	,71635	,16018	-4,08526	-3,41474	-23,411	19	,000

Table 5: Presentation delivery skills pretest -posttest statistical results

The statistically significant difference between the subjects' pretest and posttest results of the *presentation delivery* skills is also confirmed by the difference in means as table 6 below demonstrates.

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	PRESENTATIONSKILLS	1,3500	20	,48936	,10942
	presentationskills2	5,1000	20	,55251	,12354

Table 6: Presentation delivery skills pretest -posttest statistical results

To sum up, since the sig. value indicated by the statistical tables above is less than the alpha level ($p <= .05$) , we should reject the null hypothesis which states there is no statistically significant difference between the subjects' pretest and posttest results, and ascribe the existence of the significant statistical difference to the effectiveness of the adopted treatment.

5.2. Discussion

The present study's research question aimed to investigate the effect of the out-group collaborative learning method on the students' *communication, adaptability, and presentation delivery skills*. The pretest results showed that the subjects' performance was not sufficient though they were encouraged to work collaboratively in small groups before being pretested. The subjects' problems regarding the investigated skills can be ascribed to their unfamiliarity with collaborative work or being always limited to working with the same members of their small groups (the in-groups) in their schools before joining university. In their pre-treatment period, the subjects hesitated and felt uncomfortable to team up with each other, showing that they were not used to working collaboratively (Felder & Brent, 1994[29]). If they had used to work collaboratively, they could have been very interested in forming groups and working together because collaborative work raises students' motivation (Cangelosi, 2000[30]) and encourages their engagement (Good & Brophy ,2000[31]).

Additionally, though the subjects of the study benefited from one month working collaboratively in small groups, their performance in the pretest was poor. Hence, the development of their soft skills required creating a more stimulating environment which allows them to meet new members and experience new situations (Wohl &Klein-Wohl,1994[32]). This process helps to improve Students' interpersonal abilities and social interactions (Barker, Garvin-Doxas, & Jackson, 2002[33]).

The posttest results showed that an improvement happened at the level of the tested soft skills: *communication, adaptability, and presentation delivery skills*. When the students were asked to form new groups with new members every time they are given a task and encouraged to work collaboratively, they communicated better, adapted easily, and improved their presentation delivery skills. Also, it was observed that allowing students to form new groups from time to time raised their motivation and willingness to use and share the skills they learnt before with the new members. Socially speaking, the skills that people learn within their limited communities remain common and lack development until they are exposed to a different situation which allows them to explore and develop new skills. In this study, the out-group collaborative learning method helped the subjects of the study to experience working collaboratively in new groups with new members, explore new ideas, communicate effectively, adapt to the new situation, and deliver their presentations successfully.

VI. SUGGESTIONS

On the basis of the study's findings, the following suggestions can be of paramount importance for soft-skills development: The effective learning and use of the oft skills require setting up a stimulating environment that allows students' active engagement and collaboration. In this regard, the collaborative learning method is perhaps the best motivating and engaging method which can facilitate students' understanding and learning of the soft skills. The method does not only encourages students' active involvement, but it also provides real-life situations which stimulate their collaboration and learning.

Collaborative learning method enables the students to lead their learning. It is a learner centered method which encourages and maximizes student-student interaction in the classroom. On this basis, the implementation of the method will not only help the students to match their efforts and abilities to do the given tasks, but it will also make them observe how everyone expresses their ideas freely and autonomously, reflect on their own skills while negotiating their shared thoughts, and therefore shape and sharpen their soft skills.

One of the most important benefits of creating a collaborative leaning environment in the classroom is that it allows students to make mistakes and lowers their anxiety. This tolerant atmosphere encourages the students to take adventure and work on their own, develop a willingness to explore how others express themselves and engage in solving problems, and learn from each other's provided feedback. So, stimulating a tolerant collaborative environment in the classroom is of paramount importance if we aspire as educators to help our students to rebel against their fear and cross the borders of what they know to what they have not yet explored or thought about.

The first established collaborative groups, in-groups, should be considered as an insufficient environment for soft-skills building. At this level, the students' learning of the soft skills is limited to the knowledge of few members who belong to one group. Their exposure to each other's skills will be less effective and lack improvement. So, the students will need to experience another situation which can help them use the soft-skills they know, learn new ones and develop them as well.

In order for the students to rethink their limited soft-skills, learn new ones and improve them, they need to be encouraged to move from the in-group situation to the out-group situation. This latter will constitute a different context where meeting different members will help the students to see how other members use their soft-skills. In our study, the out-group method helped the subjects of the study to communicate effectively, learn to adapt to the new context, and deliver their presentations successfully .This experience has enabled them to reflect on their in-group performance, develop new skills, and learn how to use these skills better.

In our study, the out-group collaborative learning method developed the subjects' *communication* because they experienced other ways of expressing their opinions, suggesting ideas, and solving problems. That is to say, by being in contact with new members every time they are given a new task, the students can develop an ability to rethink, reshape and improve their *communication* skill.

Likewise, *presentation delivery skills* were improved by the subjects of the study when they left their in-groups to establish new connections outside. That is, the out-group situation helped the students to develop an ability to understand and sharpen their *presentation delivery skill*. The student showed good use and understanding of the verbal and non-verbal features required in the delivery of a presentation. This ability was due to their constant change of their groups to work collaboratively with different members every time they are given a new a task.

Further, as the subjects of the study worked with new members each time they were given a new task, they developed an ability to adapt to every group. Socially speaking, individuals develop the ability to adapt within different groups or communities through changing or moving outside their usual groups. Likewise, in our study the out-group collaborative learning method helped the students to adapt easily to newly formed teams.

VII. CONCLUSION

This quasi-experimental study investigated the effect of the out-group collaborative learning method on the development of students' soft skills. The study focused on investigating students' *communication, adaptability, and presentation delivery skills* because these skills are necessary for building other soft skills like team-working, emotional intelligence, and time-management skills. The findings of the study showed that the tested method, the out-group collaborative learning method, helped in developing the students' *communication, adaptability, and presentation delivery skills*.

The out-group collaborative learning method is suggested to build and develop students' soft skills because it attempts to simulate the way humans engage in their real-communities to acquire and develop their social skills. Hence, the outcomes of the study can be useful for further research and soft-skills teaching and learning. However, there are some limitations in this study that should be considered before generalizing the results more widely. First, the study is limited to investigating only three soft skills in students' collaborative performance. Second, the study is quasi-experimental. That is, the performance of a non-random group of 20 participants is measured in the pretest as well as in the posttest.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my immense gratitude to Dr. Mohammed LAROUZ, the Dean of the faculty of letters and Human Sciences at Moulay Ismail University-Meknes, for being so collaborative and helpful.

REFERENCES

[1]. J. Andrews and H. Higson, Graduate employability, soft skills versus hard business knowledge: A European study, *Higher Education in Europe*, 33(4), 2008, 411-422. doi: 10.1080/0379772802522627

[2]. P. Klaus, *The hard truth about soft skills: Workplace lessons smart people wish they'd learned sooner* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2007).

[3]. M.Robles, Executive perceptions of the top 10 soft skills needed in today's workplace, *Business Communication Quarterly*, 75(4), 2012,453–465.https://doi.org/10.1177/1080569912460400

[4]. C. Nealy, Integrating soft skills through active learning in the management classroom, *Journal of College Teaching & Learning (TLC)*, *2*(4), 2005 https://doi.org/10.19030/tlc.v2i4.1805

[5]. T.K. England, G. L. Nagel, and S. P. Salter, Using collaborative learning to develop students' soft skills, *Journal of Education for Business*, 95(2), 20201, 06–114. https://doi.org/10.1080/08832323.2019.1599797

[6]. O. Ozer, Constructivism in Piaget and Vygotsky, *The Fountain Magazine*, 48(4), 2004,1–3.

[7]. K.M. Edens, Preparing problem solvers for the 21st century through problem-based learning', *College Teaching*, 48(2), 2000,55–60.

[8]. C.H. Major and B. Palmer, Assessing the effectiveness of problem-based learning in higher education: lessons from the literature, *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 5(1), 2001, 4–9.

[9]. N. Mercer, Talk and the development of reasoning and understanding, *Human Development, 51*(1),2008 , 90–100. https://doi.org/10.1159/000113158

[10]. G. Wells, Semiotic mediation, dialogue and the construction of knowledge, *Human Development*, 50(5), 2007, 244-274. DOI:10.1159/000106414

[11]. C. Marcela and C. Castro, Transforming EFL classroom practices and promoting students ' empowerment : collaborative learning from a dialogical approach. Profile, 19(2), 2017, 135–149.

[12]. D .Johnson and R. Johnson, An educational psychology success story: Social interdependence theory and cooperative learning, *Educational Researcher*, 38(5), 2009, 365-379.

[13]. K.L. Murphy, S.E. Mahoney, C.Y. Chen, N.V. Mendoza-Diaz, and X. Yang, A constructivist model of mentoring, coaching, and facilitating Online Discussions. *Distance Education*, *26*(3), 2005, 341-366. Retrieved September 5, 2023 from https://www.learntechlib.org/p/98483/.

[14]. A. Blowers, *Power, Participation and Partnerships: The Limits of Co-operative Environmental Management* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998).

[15]. L.S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The development of higher psychological precesses* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,1978).

[16]. J.P. Lantolf, and A. Pavlenko, Sociocultural theory and second language acquisition, *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*,15, 1995 ,38–53

[17]. B. Rogoff, J. Wertsch, *Children's learning in the 'Zone of Proximal Development* (San Francisco : Calif., Jossey-Bass, 1984).

[18]. H. J.Anderson, J. E. Baur, J. A.Griffith, and M. R. Buckley, What works for you may not work for (Gen) Me: Limitations of present leadership theories for the new generation, *Leadership Quarterly*, 28(1),2017 , 245–260. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2016.08.001.

[19]. S. Durocher, S., M.Bujaki, and F. Brouard, Attracting millennials: legitimacy management and bottom-up socialization processes within accounting firms, *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, 39, 2016, 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpa.2016.02.002.

[20]. A. M. Grossman and L. R. Johnson, How employers perceive online accounting education: Evidence from Kentucky, *Journal of Accounting Education*, 40, 2017, 19–31. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaccedu.2017.06.002.

[21]. A. Fisher, Soft skill are hard to measure and in demand. can they be taught ? World Economic Forum, 2019.

[22]. D. Ashcraft and T. Treadwell, Social categorization: In-groups and out-groups, *The Social Psychology of Online Collaborative Learning*, 2008. https://www.wcupa.edu/coral/documents/07in- outgroups.pd

[23]. J. Christensen, J. L.Harrison, J.Hollindale, J.Christensen, J.L. Harrison, and J. Hollindale, Implementing team-based learning (TBL) in accounting courses, *Accounting Education*, 0(0), 2018, 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/09639284.2018.1535986.

[24]. T. J. Shawver, An experimental study of cooperative learning in advanced financial accounting course, *Accounting Education*, 0(0), 2020,1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/09639284.2020.1736589.

[25]. S. B. Fiechtner and E. A., Davis., 1985 Why some groups fail: A survey of students' experiences with learning groups, *The Organizational Behavior Teaching Review, 9(4),1985, pp. 75-88.*

[26]. CIPD, *Using the head and heart at work. A business case for soft skills* (London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development)
[27]. C. S. Reichardt, *Quasi-experimentation: A guide to design and analysis* (Guilford Press, 2019).
[28]. J. S. Cangelosi , *Classroom management strategies* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2000).
[29]. T. L Good and J. E Brophy, *Looking in classrooms* (New York : Longman, ,2000)
[30]. A. Wahl and E. Klein-Wohl , Teaching and learning the language arts with cooperative learning methods. In Sharan, S. (Ed.), *Handbook of cooperative learning methods*, (Westport, CN, London: Greenwood, 1994).
[31]. L. J. Barker, K.Garvin-Doxas and M. Jackson, Defensive climate in the Computer Science Classroom, *ACM SIGCSE Bulletin*, 34, 2002, 43-47. https://doi.org/10.1145/563517.563354