

## Towards Developing Students' Soft Skills: The Case of ENSAM Students

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**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 Supérieure d'Arts et Métiers" (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, creativity, 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 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 opportunity 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 and use 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.*

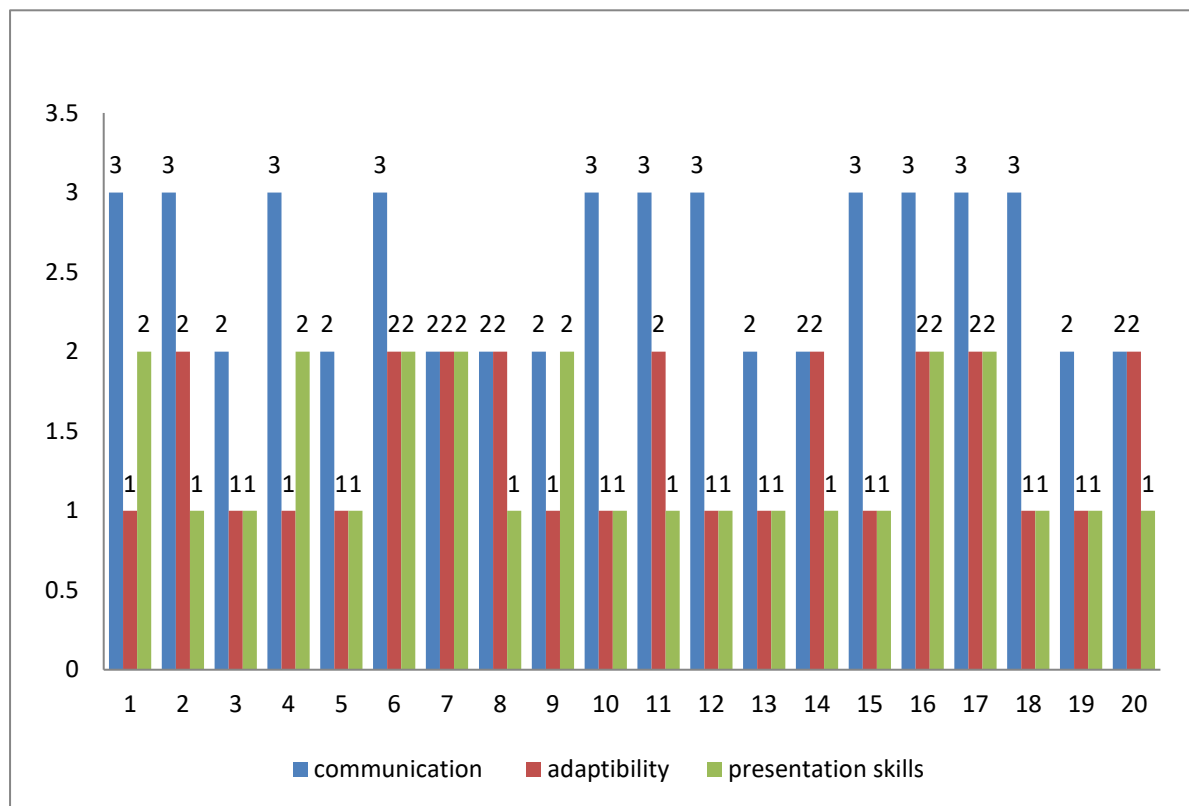


Figure 1: Pretest results

**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.

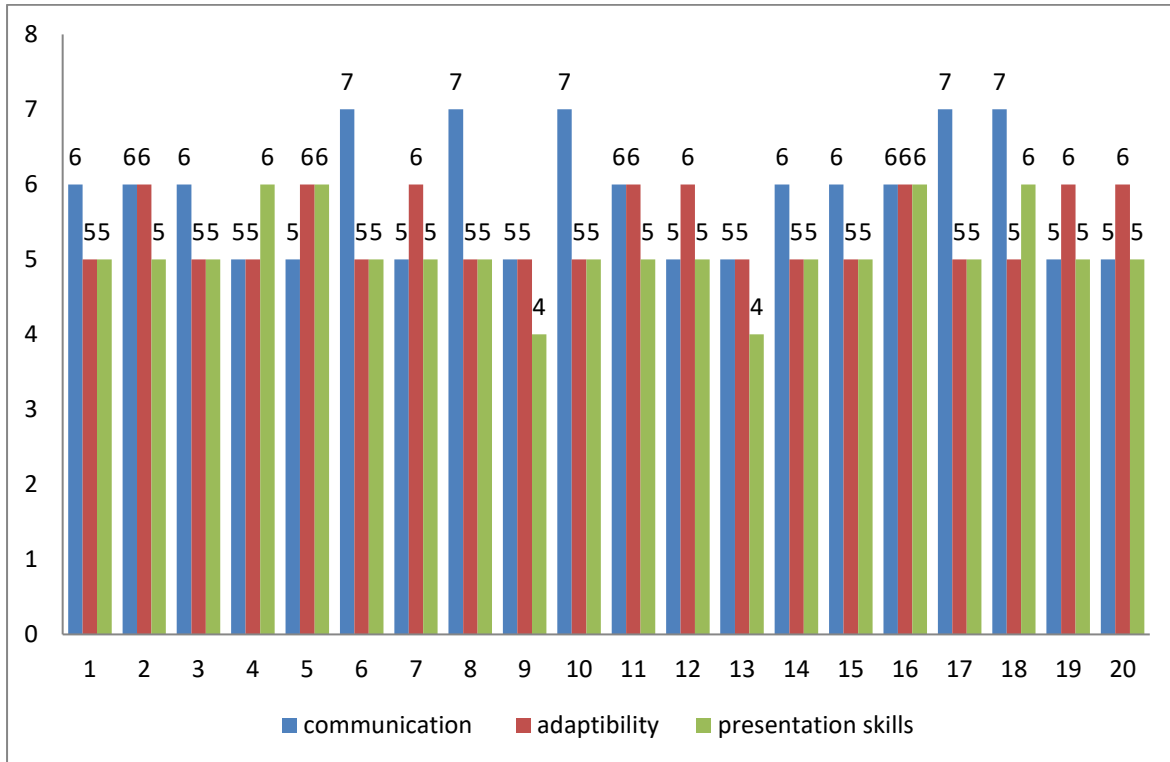


Figure 2: Posttest results

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 1 Communication pretest 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 1 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 skills pretest -posttest statistical results**

The statistically significant difference between the subjects' pretest and posttest results of the *presentation delivery* soft skill 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 skills pretest -posttest statistical results**

To sum up, since the sig. value indicated by the statistical tables above is less than the alpha level ( $p \leq .05$ ), 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 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 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 and improved their presentation delivery skills. Also, it was observed that allowing them 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 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 soft 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 encourage 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 learning 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 situation helped the subjects of the study to notice how the new members use their *communication* and *presentation delivery skills*. 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, suggesting, and solving their tasks. That is to say, by being in contact with new members every time they are given a new task, the students develop an ability to rethink, reshape and improve their skill of *communication*.

Likewise, the *presentation delivery skill* was 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 task.

## 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 and presentation delivery skills* because these skills are necessary for building other soft skills like team-working, emotional intelligence, and time-management. The out-group collaborative learning method is suggested to build and develop students' soft skills. It attempts to simulate the way humans naturally engage in real-life situations to acquire and develop their social skills. The findings of the study showed that the tested method, the out-group collaborative learning method, helped in developing the students' *communication and presentation delivery skills*. Hence, the outcomes of the study can be reliable and useful for further research and for 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.

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