EMPLOYERS' PERCEPTIONS ON ALGERIAN ENGLISH MAJOR GRADUATES' SOFT SKILLS: DJELFA PRIVATE SCHOOLS CASE STUDY

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Abstract: The transition of English major graduates into the job market poses significant challenges. According to prior research, the lack of the required soft skills underlies those defies. However, scant or no attention is paid to the perspectives of employers regarding English as a Foreign Language (EFL) graduates' soft skills. To address this gap, this study aims to investigate employers' perceptions on Algerian EFL graduates' soft skills in the district of Djelfa. To this end, employers from 23 private schools participated in this study. Through a mixed-approach design, they filled out structured questionnaires and partook in interviews. The findings signal a discernible misalignment between employer expectations and the actual soft skill levels of EFL graduates. This mismatch accentuates the pressing need for closer harmonization between educational curricula and industry requisites. Furthermore, employers advocate for bolstering soft skills through targeted educational interventions, training initiatives, and harnessing the potential of Artificial Intelligence. This study spotlights the imperative for concerted efforts to bridge the gap between academia and industry.

Keywords: Algeria, EFL, employers, perceptions, private schools, soft skills

How to cite the article :
Hassani , M., & Meharet, S. (2025). Employers' Perceptions on Algerian English Major Graduates' Soft Skills: Djelfa Private Schools Case Study. *Journal of Studies in Language, Culture, and Society (JSLCS)8*(2), 393-403.

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary world, employability is deemed an ultimate objective for most students. Amidst the stiff competition within the job market, some students incline to relinquish their studies to early enhance their employability skills. Students of English are no exception, they embark on their academic journey with the explicit intention of boosting their prospects for future employment. The extant literature suggests that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) graduates exhibit a modest level of soft skills' level. Howbeit, those studies are based solely on teachers' and students' perceptions, while employers' views regarding these skills remain shrouded in obscurity.

Given the aforementioned gap in previous research, delving into EFL graduates' soft skills from employers' angle is incumbent. Building on a foundation laid by prior studies (Mehdaoui, 2022; Miliani, 2021; Missoum, 2021), this inquiry is timely and it warrants a comprehensive investigation. It holds the potential to illuminate critical aspects of employability skills from the vantage points of hiring managers. Preeminently, the Algerian EFL context entails in-depth studies about 21st-century skills to furnish the quo state of this sphere with updated insights.

Furthermore, exploring employers' perceptions of EFL graduates' soft skills transcends the confines of stakeholders' and students' scopes. This study has the potential to serve as a bridge that spans between employers, teachers, and students regarding soft skills. By unfolding employers' perspectives, EFL teachers can adapt their practices to best equip their students to the ever-changing demands of the professional realm. Hence, educational authorities can tailor curricula to better meet the needs of students and future employers. A holistic understanding of soft skills can contribute to aligning students' expectations with university learning objectives.

Consequently, gleaning insights from employers regarding EFL graduates' soft skills is crucial to closing the gap identified in earlier scholarly inquiries. Addressing the following research questions lays the ground to fulfill this aim:

- What are the soft skills required by employers to hire EFL graduates?
- What is the level of EFL graduates in soft skills?
- How can EFL graduates improve their soft skills?

2. Literature Review

Employability skills are of utmost importance for individuals in 21st century. Undoubtedly, these skills can enhance individuals' capabilities, thereby enhancing their overall productivity. Particularly in today's context, where a value-added approach is increasingly emphasized (Cranmer, 2006; Harvey, 2001) , these skills are paramount. In such frameworks, job seekers are valued not only for fulfilling job duties but also for their potential to contribute more, adding extra value to their roles. Ergo, soft skills are deemed the quintessence of employability skills.

2.1 Definition of Soft Skills

The term "soft skills" or "generic skills," as discussed by Zaharim et al. (2009), has been globally recognized across various languages for its significance in both professional and personal realms. According to Creutzmann's (2019), it encompasses the essential interpersonal abilities necessary for achieving success (p. 5). These skills facilitate effective interaction with others, foster readiness for future professional endeavors, and enable individuals to exhibit flexibility and sound decision-making (Melser, 2022). Despite their

intangible nature, soft skills play a crucial role in shaping individual's career trajectory and overall success. They cater as vital components for navigating diverse social and professional environments.

2.2 Framework of Soft Skills

The literature abounds with several clusters of soft skills. According to Tyson (2020), soft skills can be personal and they include personal responsibility and work ethic; and they can be interpersonal "including the ability to collaborate as a member of a team or work independently, as appropriate...and contribute to the overarching goals of the workplace" (p. 17). The Australian framework is based on eight-group skills, namely: communication; teamwork; problem-solving; initiative and enterprise; planning and organizing; self-management; learning; and technology (Department of Education, 2006). Other frameworks disaggregate soft skills according to functions and traits (Bloom & Kitagawa, 1999; Detsimas et al., 2016; Simatele, 2015). However, Donina & Lapina (2020) assumed that the Australian model encompasses an accurate and comprehensive classification of soft skills.

2.3 Soft Skills in Higher Education

Soft skills may be developed in tandem with academic knowledge in higher education. They can be developed consciously or sub-consciously through a variety of educational activities such as group discussions and projects (Cleary et al., 2006; Trought, 2017). When the educational experience is comprehensive, it equips students with a variety of skills that can be essential for joining today's workforce. Nevertheless, a growing body of literature is casting doubt on the efficacy of graduates' soft skills. It reckons that those skills partially and sometimes do not even converge with employers' expectations (Dolce et al., 2020; Noah & Abdul Aziz, 2020).

2.4 Employers' Perceptions of Soft Skills

Employers maintain high expectations of graduates' soft skills. According to Trought (2017), businesses hire graduates because they anticipate a high level of soft skills. In the same vein, Fajaryati et al. (2020) concluded that employers foreground abilities like communication, problem-solving, and adaptability, especially in dynamic work environments. Nonetheless, the permutation of these skills depends on context and it shifts over time (Donina & Lapina, 2020). Accordingly, soft skills remain crucial for employers despite the revolutionary impact of technology on the job market. Employers may prioritize some soft skills over the other but they cannot relinquish their importance in general.

2.5 EFL Graduates' Prospective Employers

In the Algerian EFL context, most graduates are inclined to pursue their future careers as teachers. In their research, Belaid and Sarnou (2019) found that EFL graduates prioritize teaching over other career paths. Similarly, Mehdaoui (2022) posited that teaching is perceived as the most accessible profession by English major students. Therefore, the prospective employers of EFL graduates are likely to be private or public school managers. Recruitment in public institutions is predicated on several often complicated procedures. However, private schools' managers often mandate solely a diploma as an academic qualification, as they focus more on assessing candidate's skills. They typically utilize methods like interviews, questionnaires, or application forms to assess skills and rank job applicants.

2.6 Previous Studies on EFL Soft Skills in Algeria

Several studies have already tackled certain aspects of EFL students' soft skills. They concluded that leadership, collaboration, designing, problem-solving and solution-suggesting

are developed through project-based learning, which is the recommended methodology in Algerian tertiary levels (Ghobrini, 2020). Those skills, among others, are honed at university through regular EFL major day-to-day studies. Nevertheless, pre-teacher training is of utmost importance to narrow the gap between theory and practice and develop the required soft skills (Hadi, 2021; Sarnou & Hanane, 2021).

Previous research draws on employers' required soft skills from EFL students' perceptions. Mehdaoui (2022) concluded that students perceive "communication skills" as employers' most required skill set. On the other hand, Missoum (2021) raised concerns about the gap between EFL graduates' soft skills and employers' required abilities. The repercussions of this disparity are characterized by graduates' difficulty to secure a job and underutilization of potential (Madoui, 2015). The mismatch of visions not only stunts economic growth by wasting human capital, it also alters individuals' behavior by encouraging them to forgo their studies early to gain employment. Despite all the aforementioned issues, no studies were undertaken to directly investigate Algerian employers' perspectives on EFL graduates' soft skills.

3. Methodology

3.1 Context

This study was undertaken during April 2024 in the district of Djelfa in Algeria. Private school managers were reached to complete the questionnaire. Due to their ongoing responsibilities, managers could not finish the questionnaire on the same day; therefore, researchers had to leave the questionnaire and return to collect it another day. Similarly, the interview questions were intentionally concise and precise, aiming to gather maximum data within a minimal timeframe.

3.2 Participants

The participants of this study were 23 private school managers from the district of Djelfa in Algeria. Five were female (21,74 %) and eighteen were male (78,26 %). Most participants were from the age group of 35- 45 (71, 4%). The participants were chosen according to convenience sampling.

3.3 Instruments

The research tools of this study were a structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The structured questionnaire was chosen to collect a large amount of data in short time regarding the busy schedule and responsibilities of private school managers. It was adapted from a PhD dissertation (Shan'a, 2020), and it was modified to align with the eight-group soft skills framework and the Algerian context. It was designed to assess employers' perceptions regarding the importance of soft skills to recruit EFL graduates and the level of EFL graduates in the given skill. The questionnaire was sent to twenty-five managers of private schools; however, only nineteen completed the questionnaire. For the interview, it was designed to triangulate the quantitative data and provide qualitative data. Four managers participated in the interview in which they answered three open-ended questions.

3.4 Procedures

This study was undertaken during April 2024 in the district of Djelfa in Algeria. Private school managers were reached to complete the questionnaire. Due to their ongoing responsibilities, managers could not finish the questionnaire on the same day; therefore, researchers had to leave the questionnaire and return to collect it another day. Similarly, the interview questions were intentionally concise and precise, aiming to gather maximum data within a minimal timeframe.

4. Results

The results of this study are presented according to the statements and the questions of the questionnaire and the interview.

4.1 Questionnaire Results

The results of the questionnaire were analyzed according to the Lickert scale's recent updates (Pimentel, 2019). Accordingly, the weights of the means were estimated.

Table 1.

Communication Skills Results

Level of EFL graduates		Communication Skills	Importance of skill	
weight	mean		mean	weight
High	3.43	Writing official letters	3.43	High
high	3.5	Writing CV	3.93	High
high	3.43	Expressing their ideas clearly and confidently in speech	4.57	Very high
average	3.29	Listening carefully to others to understand their ideas	4.29	Very high
average	3.29	Giving oral presentation.	4.21	Very high
average	3.29	Interacting effectively in interviews	3.79	High
low	2.58	Using body movements / gestures.	3.43	high

Table 1 displays the detailed results of communication skills. The level of EFL graduates' communication skills ranged between low and high (2.58-3.5). The lowest rated skill was "using body movements/gestures" and the highest rated skill was "Writing CV". The importance of communication skills was rated between high and very high (3.43- 4.57), marking "Expressing their ideas clearly and confidently in speech " skills as the most important communication skill, while "writing official letters" and using body movement" as the least important skills.

Table 2.

Learning Skills Results

Level of EFL graduates		Learning Skills	Importance of skill	
weight	mean		mean	weight
High	3.71	Taking the opportunity to learn new skills	4	high
high	3.5	adapting learning strategies to different situations and subjects.	3.79	high

As presented in Table 2, All the results of learning skills were high. The level of EFL graduates' learning skills ranged between 3.5 and 3.71. Whereas the importance of learning skills was rated between 3.79 and 4.

Table 3.

Problem-solving Skills Results

Level of EFL graduates		Problem-solving Skills	Importance of skill	
weight	mean		mean	weight
average	3	Clarifying the nature of a problem before deciding on action.	4	high
average	3.14	Identifying workable solutions.	4.14	high
high	3.43	Making decisions supported by evidence/data	3.71	high

Table 3 presents the results of problem-solving skills. The level of EFL graduates' skills ranged between average and high (3- 3.43). The importance of problem-solving skills was reported as high.

Table 4.

Initiatives and Enterprise Skills Results

Level of EFL graduates		Initiatives and Enterprise Skills	Importance of skill	
weight	mean		mean	weight
high	4	Launching the initiative	3.93	high
high	3.71	Convincing others, to discuss and reach an	3.86	high
high	3.43	Making concessions to reach an agreement	4.28	Very high

The level of EFL graduates in initiatives and enterprise skills was reported as high (see Table 4). The importance of these skills was rated between high and very high (3.86- 4.28). The skill of "making concessions to reach an agreement" was reported as very important (4.28).

Table 5.

Teamwork Skills Results

Level of EFL graduates		Teamwork Skills	Importance of skill	
weight	mean		mean	weight
average	3	Discussing conflict resolution in the team	3.57	high
high	4.07	Contributing their ideas effectively in a group	3.93	high
Average	2.86	Taking a share of the responsibility	3.93	high
Average	3.07	Accepting and learning from constructive criticism	4.28	Very high
Average	3.21	Giving positive, constructive feedback.	3.97	high

Table 5 represents the results of teamwork skills. The level of EFL graduates ranged between average and high (2.86- 4.07). Whereas the importance of these skills was reported as high, except for the skills of "Accepting and learning from constructive criticism" which was reported as very important (4.28).

Table 6.

Computer Skills Results

Level of EFL graduates		Computer Skills	Importance of skill	
weight	mean		mean	weight
average	3.07	Word Processing	3.57	high
low	2	Spreadsheet/Excel	3.07	average
Very low	1.73	Database	2.58	low
average	2.71	PowerPoint	3.78	high
high	3.46	Internet search	4.21	Very high

Table 6 shows the results of computer skills. The level of EFL graduates' communication skills ranged between very low and high (1.73 -3.46). The lowest-rated skill was "Database" and the highest rated skill was "Internet search". The importance of computer skills was rated between low and very high (2.58- 4.21), "Internet search " skill was reported as the most important skill, whereas "database" was reported as the least important skill.

Table 7.

Planning and Organizing Skills Results

Level of EFL graduates		Planning and Organizing Skills	Importance of skill	
weight	mean		mean	weight
average	3.07	Planning ahead, but having alternative options in case things go wrong.	3.93	high
high	3.64	Paying attention to quality in all their work.	4.36	Very high

The level of EFL graduates in planning and organizing skills ranged between average and high (3.07- 3.64) (see Table 7). The importance of these skills was rated between high and very high (3.93- 4.36). The skill of "paying attention to quality in all their work" was reported as very important (4.36).

Table 8.

Self-management Skills Results

Level of EFL graduates		Self-management Skills	Importance of skill	
weight	mean		mean	weight
average	3	Adapting to unexpected situations and problems	4	high
High	3.5	Holding a positive attitude to failure	4	high
Low	2.29	Being able to work under pressure	3.86	high
High	3.57	Being at work on time (Punctual)	4.5	Very high
high	3.5	Meeting targets and deadlines	4.71	Very high

Table 8 presents the results of self-management skills. The level of EFL graduates' skills ranged between low and high (2.29-3.57). The lowest-rated skill was "being able to work under pressure" and the highest-rated skill was "being at work on time". The importance of self-management skills was rated between high and very high (3.86- 4.71), marking the "meeting targets and deadlines" skill as the most important skill (4.71).
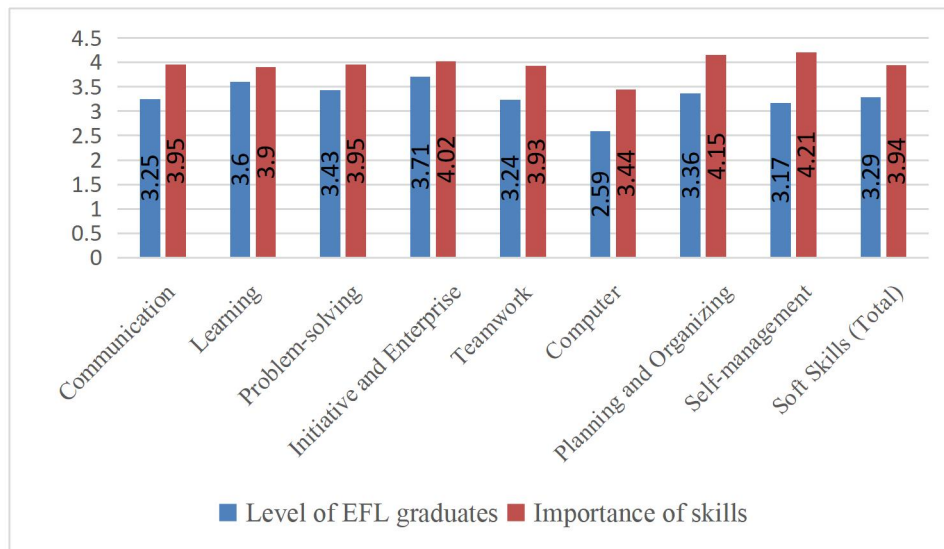
Figure 1. Importance of Soft Skills and Level of EFL Graduates in Soft Skills According to Employers

Regarding the total rates, participants reported the importance of soft skills as high (3.94) and the level of EFL graduates in soft skills as average (3.29) (see Figure 1). The level of EFL graduates in communication, teamwork, planning and organizing, and self-management was reported as average. Whereas their level of learning, problem-solving, initiative and enterprise was high. However, graduates' level of computer skills was rated as low. Considering the importance of soft skills, all the skills were reported of high importance except for self-management skills which were reported of a very high importance.

4.2 Interview Results

Participants answered thoroughly the three questions of the interview. For the first question, they claimed that they require commitment, time management, and constructive communication. They highlighted their need to hire EFL graduates with 21st-century technical skills such as video editing and Artificial Intelligence (AI) skills. According to them, those skills can significantly enhance their employability skills in general. For the second question, participants assumed that EFL graduates lack self-development and public speaking skills. For the third question, participants reckoned that those lacks can be handled through teaching and training students in seminars. Participants frequently mentioned the lack and the need for hard skills namely, teaching skills.

5. Discussion

The objectives of this study were: a- To identify the soft skills required by employers to hire EFL graduates, b- to specify the level of EFL graduates in soft skills, c- to identify methods that can improve EFL graduates' soft skills.

With reference to the first research objective, the findings of the study corroborated the paramount significance employers attributed to soft skills as their top priority. While all skills surveyed were deemed highly important, self-management skills emerged as the most crucial in according to employers. Notably, "communication skills" were reported as a pivotal cluster, this result resonates with previous research (Ferhaoui & Ouyahia, 2022; Mehdaoui, 2022). Moreover, "the ability to meet targets and deadlines" was singled out as paramount. However, the integration of teachers' perspectives is essential to ensure a comprehensive approach in equipping today's students for the demands of tomorrow's job market; hence, completing the cyclical process of preparation.

For the second research objective, employers rated EFL graduates' soft skills as average. They particularly reported "initiative and enterprise skills" as high. Furthermore, employers highlighted the graduates' exceptional ability to "contribute ideas effectively in a group" as the pinnacle of their independent skill set. However, the evaluation also revealed a concerning gap in the area of computer proficiency, specifically in database skills, which was rated as low. This deficiency in computer skills echoes previous findings (Ameziane & Nahi, 2025; Bentaleb, 2021), it further forewarns about the digital literacy of EFL teachers (Hassani & Meharet, 2024). Nevertheless, possessing a high level of initiative and enterprise without a proper level of computer skills may hinder employability chances in the 21st century.

Comparing the obtained results, EFL graduates' level of soft skills was lower than the requirements of employers. Unequivocally, Trought (2017) stated that employers expect a high level of soft skills from graduates. While not expected to be as pronounced, this disparity was anticipated. Nonetheless, the gap between the EFL graduates 'computer skills level and the required level of those skills was not expected. A possible explanation is the difference between employer's prospects and school culture.

Regarding the third objective, employers suggested improving soft skills through learning and training. They emphasized the role of higher education in teaching those skills, besides organizing seminars for training. Interestingly, employers stressed the role of Artificial Intelligence in honing employability skills generally.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, this study stresses the significance of soft skills for the employability of EFL graduates from the standpoint of employers. The results indicated in particular the importance of communication and self-management skills for employers. Although employers reported that EFL graduates possess a high level of initiative and enterprise skills, they signaled a critical deficiency in graduates' computer skills. Moreover, the findings demonstrated a mismatch between employers' expectations and EFL graduates' soft skills. Those discrepancies may impinge EFL graduates' employability skills and; hence, their chances for future employment. Teachers and authorities need to adjust the curriculum to align with employers' requirements. They should enhance the required skills by incorporating practical training. Furthermore, AI can be integrated to facilitate the enhancement of soft skills as it presents an opportunity for boosting students' employability prospects in the 21st century.

Further research is needed to compare the perspectives of employers, teachers, and students regarding EFL graduates' soft skills and employability skills in general. In addition, the nexus between artificial intelligence and employability skills should be further investigated. Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies must delve into the impact of technological advancements on the skills demanded by the contemporary workforce.

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