

In Search of Quality Student Teachers in a Digital Era: Reframing the Practices of Soft Skills in Teacher Education

Hadiyanto

Jambi University, Indonesia, hadi_tesl05@yahoo.com

Amirul MUKMININ

Jambi University, Indonesia, Amirul.mukminin@unj.ac.id

Failasofah

Jambi University, Indonesia

Nely ARIF

Jambi University, Indonesia

Nunung FAJARYANI

Jambi University, Indonesia

Akhmad HABIBI

Jambi University, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this current study was to examine and document the practices of soft skills (communication, IT, numeracy, learning how to learn, problem solving, working with others, and subject-specific competencies) among English as foreign language (EFL) student teachers at one public university teacher education program in Jambi, Indonesia. The study centred on examining the level of soft skills practised by EFL student teachers in their learning process and the level of student engagement in every statement of soft skill components. Data were collected through distributing a questionnaire to EFL student teachers. The findings of the study showed the mean score of soft skills practices in overall (3.28 of 5.00) which was at an average level. A closer examination on more specific skills, five of seven Soft skills were practiced at medium level; they were numeracy, learning how to learn, IT and problem solving and subject-specific competencies. However they rated their soft skills in term of communication and working each other at high level. The findings implied that the soft skills were not well-blended and practiced in learning and teaching process at the research site.

Keywords: Soft skills, development, practice, university, higher education

INTRODUCTION

There have been evolving interests in ASEAN countries at the early twentieth centuries in the field of soft skills and other skills, because of the emerging quality industry in higher education. Soft skills are defined as the personal attributes and values that ought to be acquired during university education, irrespective of the students' disciplines (Higher Education Council of Australia, 1992; Directorate General of Indonesian Higher Education, 2003.) Additionally, soft skills are skills that students need to acquire in order to become successful higher education learners and successful employers in the fields of their study and work and in other aspects of their life and therefore, are important outcome of university education (Clark 1998).

The importance of skills development and their inclusion in higher education curriculum is of on going interests that did not go away in the nineties as is evidenced by some literature on the topic. For instance, Fallows & Steven (2000) suggest that it is no longer adequate for new graduates to simply acquire knowledge of an academic subject. They suggested that broader skills including retrieval and handling of information, communication and presentation, planning and problem solving and social development and interaction were also critical for graduate employment in the 21st century. Additionally, it suggests that the development of any skill is best facilitated by giving students practices and not by simply talking about or demonstrating what to do. In other words, for the 21st century graduates, the teaching and learning at university level now, should be more on students-centred where students build their soft skills by various activities in the classroom. Graduates need to be prepared by a range of soft skills that underpin success in communication skills, application of number,

information technology, team working, improving own learning and performance and problem solving skills. However, to our knowledge, research on the practices of soft skills among student teachers in Indonesia is understudied. The purpose of this current study was to document the practices of soft skills among English as foreign language (EFL) student teachers at one public university teacher education program in Jambi, Indonesia. The study centred on: What is the level of soft skills practised by EFL student teachers in their learning process? What is the level of student engagement in every statement of soft skill components including communication, numeracy, IT, learning how to learn, problem solving, teamwork, and subject-specific competencies?

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In our study, the following conceptual framework (adapted from Jelas et al., 2006; Hadiyanto, 2011) was used to illustrate the data resources, the research process, and the type of data collected to attain the research objective.

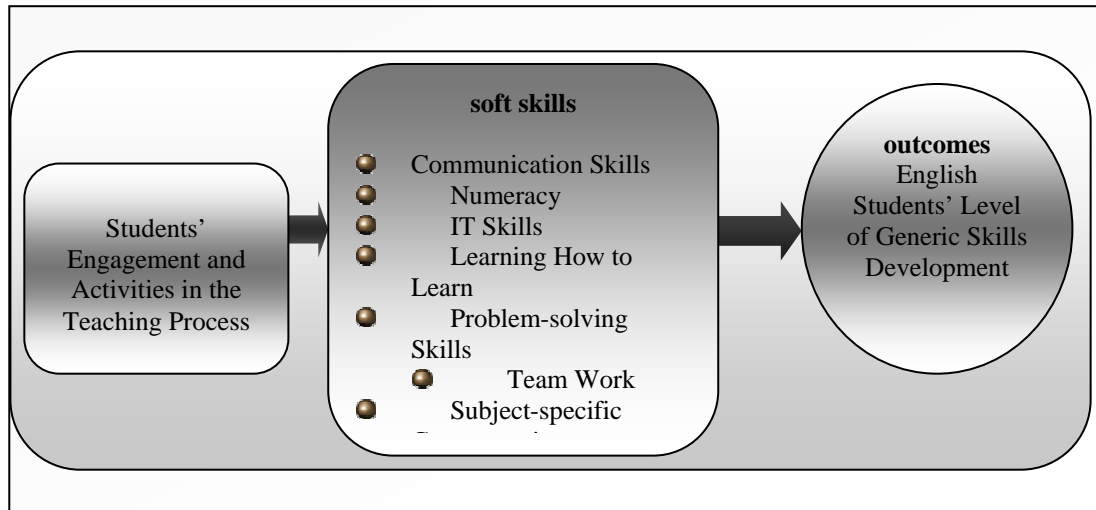


Figure 1. The conceptual framework of the study

The conceptual framework shown in Figure 1 illustrates how students’ engagement and activities were generated in the classroom in relation to the development of soft skills. Soft skills are defined the set of skills or abilities essential to fulfilling the three potential outcomes of higher education, namely, the needs and requirements of employers in the marketplace, lifelong learning, and good citizenship. In this study, the soft skill set was considered to consist of seven skills: communication, numeracy, IT, learning how to learn, problem solving, Team Work, and subject-specific competencies (Jelas & Azman, 2005; Bennett et al., 2000; Cornford, 1999). The seven soft skills as displayed in the conceptual framework will be briefly elaborated in the sections below.

Students learning activities are designed with a view of encouraging students to actively participate in their process of learning. Priority is placed on lecturers’ setting goals and objectives for the students’ engagement and activities related to the promotion of communication, IT usage, numeracy, learning how to learn, working with others and specific subject content (Jelas & Azman 2005; Washer, 2007). A set of questionnaire is administered to acquired information of the practices of core competencies through the students’ engagement and activities. Students’ engagement and activities on individual of core competencies are briefly described as follow.

Communication skills continue to be essential at work so as to maintain successful job performance. The skills need to enable graduates delivering their idea as individual or as group member and comprising a diversity of backgrounds in order to come out with a good decision, solution and negotiations (Morreale, Osborn, & Pearson, 2000). In our study communication practices would be investigated by looking at students’ presentation, participating in discussion, sharing idea with peer, way of integrating information from various sources, etc. Moreover, numeracy skills are not only related with number, however it includes the ability to handle information, to express ideas and opinions, to make decisions, solve problems, time management, and job priority (Jelas, et al., 2006) and (Bennet, Dunne, & Carre, 2000). In this study, we focused on numeracy activities such as time management, identifying relevant and irrelevant information, reporting tasks or assignments by using tables, charts, graphs and numbers.

Another important soft skill that we focused on is information technology skill which is one of the ‘core competencies’ appearing to create a powerful synergy for core competencies development. Harington and McLoughlin (1999) explained that the use of technology in teaching and learning would provide many opportunities to teachers and learners in order to develop their lifelong learning. In this study, students’ IT

practices include the use of Computer, Cd Rooms, internet, WEB, Online conference, program, software, database, video and others technology by students for learning. We also looked at learning how to learn related to learning features processes, understandings and skills that can be learned and taught when one has gained mastery in learning how to learn, one can learn effectively and efficiently at any age (Bennet, Dunne, & Carre, 2000). Thus, this competence is thought to be of potential importance to the concept of lifelong learning and the self-managed learner (Smith, 1982). In this study, learning how to learn encompasses improving self-ability, performance, self-management, self-learning, identifying learning strategy, and prioritizing tasks. Another soft skill that we looked at is problem solving skills practices meaning to enable students to tackle problems systematically at the working place towards the solution and learning from this process (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), 2002). Cook & Slife (1985) stated that the ability to solve problems would have a great impact on success of the students' "real life" endeavours. According to, Pumphrey and Slater (2002), the ability to resolve business or operational problems and to reduce downtime, and increase system efficiency is all part of the pressures now faced by employees at almost all occupational levels. This requires an individual to focus on the whole production and delivery process in order to understand the significance of a task; on the other hand, it requires independence of thought and action, and a sense of resourcefulness to pre-empt, identify or remedy problems. In our study, problem-solving skills that were investigated through students' activities for instances, problem identification in doing assignment, ways of tackle problem, looking at previous problem, PBL, case studies, self-learning.

We also looked at working with others (WWO) development focusing on helping students to learn to become valued members of a team – which is one of the most vital skills that one should have for employability (QCA, 2004). The ability to work as team member will give a great impact to produce new ideas and to find the way out in every situation of real work life. In this study, WWO development are related to students' activities in group, such as group discussion, group assignment or project, collaboration and cooperation, and inter-communications with different races. Last, we investigated subject specific competencies referring to subject content knowledge, core concepts, ideas, values, and facts, related with students' selected discipline that can be practiced and applied in the real world integrated setting (Jackson & Hancock, 2010; Hodgson & Spours, 2002; Kearns, 2001; Kelly, 2001). In this study, participants were asked to report their frequency level in completing tasks given by lecturer including discussing concepts, ideas, values and facts, and students' activities such as explain contents of knowledge, utilize knowledge in practicum and apply content of knowledge in doing assignment.

METHOD

This study was part of our larger study on documenting the practices of soft skills among student teachers at one public university teacher education program in Jambi, Indonesia. In this study, we reported the findings of our study on English as foreign language (EFL) student teachers at one teacher education program public university, in Jambi, Indonesia. At the beginning we planned to recruit all 98 EFL student teachers of the last year in their program, however, only 54 EFL student teachers returned the informed consent form to us. This study drew upon a questionnaire to document the practices of soft skills among English as foreign language (EFL) student teachers at one public university teacher education program in Jambi, Indonesia. Participants were asked to elicit students' self-reports regarding their level of frequency in practicing soft skills. They were asked to respond to each statement about their practice of soft skills using a 5-point Likert scale (never, rarely, sometimes, often, and very often). The mean score of the respondents' level of soft skills was calculated and interpreted in three levels, as shown in Table1.

Table 1. Mean Interpretation of Soft Skills Practices

Mean Score	Level
1.00 – 1.80	Very Low
1.81 – 2.60	Low
2.61 – 3.40	Medium
3.41 – 4.20	High
4.21 – 5.00	Very High

As Table 1 shows, a mean score between 1.00 and 2.33 indicates a low level of soft skills, a mean score between 2.34 and 3.66 a medium level, and a mean score between 3.67 and 5.00 a high level of soft skills.

A reliability analysis demonstrated that all constructs of soft skills included in the study had a high Cronbach alpha coefficient (>0.7) and corrected-item correlation (>.300). The instrument was developed from theory and concept of soft skills practices at the higher education, and it had been administered at previous research (Hadiyanto, 2011).

FINDINGS

The purpose of this current study was to examine and document the practices of soft skills (communication, IT, numeracy, learning how to learn, problem solving, working with others, and subject-specific competencies) among English as foreign language (EFL) student teachers at one public university teacher education program in Jambi, Indonesia. The study centred on examining the level of soft skills practised by EFL student teachers in their learning process and the level of student engagement in every statement of soft skill components. In the following, the practices of soft skills among EFL student teachers at one public university teacher education program in Jambi, Indonesia will be presented.

Overall levels of students' soft skills

The findings of the study showed the mean score of soft skills practices in overall (3.28 of 5.00) which was at an average level. A closer examination of the mean score given by the EFL student teachers to each soft skill showed that the practices of communication, IT, numeracy, learning how to learn, problem solving, and Team Work were at a medium level (see Table 2). The findings implied that the soft skills were not well-blended and practiced in learning and teaching process at the research site.

As displayed in Table 3, the mean scores of all constructs remained at the medium of 3.28. This score could be interpreted that the students were still at a medium level of soft skills practices (Refer to Table 4). Every aspect of soft skills also yielded a mean score at medium level. Ironically, looking at the mean score of the aspect 'Subject Specific Competencies', the respondents, whom would be future English teachers, scored only at the medium level (mean = 3.34). Nonetheless, referring to standard competency of English teacher, to be good teachers, one of the competencies that one must have is the capability to master own subject content. This signified that participants had not acquired and practiced satisfied soft skills and had not mastered the subject specific competency yet to be good teachers.

Table 2. Overall mean and level of soft skills practices

Soft Skills	Mean	S.td	Level
Communication Skills	3.36	.413	Medium
Numeracy	3.30	.610	Medium
IT Skills	2.93	.493	Medium
Learning How to Learn	3.32	.461	Medium
Problem-solving Skills	3.23	.517	Medium
Team Work	3.40	.499	Medium
Subject-specific Competencies	3.34	.473	Medium
Overall	3.28	.352	Medium

Communication Skills

As displayed in Table 3, the practices of communication skill in overall were at a medium level (mean score 3.36). Looking at each indicator of communication skills showed that seven of eight were practiced at a medium level (mean between 2.61 – 3.40), they were using different format, using varied vocabulary and expressions, integrating ideas or information, monitoring and reflecting, summarizing key issues, and giving feedback, while class presentation was at a high level (4.16). This finding signified that the practices communication skills were not encouraged in the process of teaching learning.

Table 3. Overall mean and level of communication skills practices

Communication	Mean	S.td	Level
Making a class presentation	4.16	.504	High
Using different formats for presenting information	2.98	.604	Medium
Using varied vocabulary and expressions	3.37	.623	Medium
Integrating ideas or information from various sources in paper writing	3.53	.719	Medium
Monitoring and reflecting on the use of communication skills	3.14	.711	Medium
Reflecting and evaluating on use of communication skills	3.18	.728	Medium
Summarizing key issues from a classmate oral presentation	3.14	.711	Medium
Giving feedback (question, comment or suggestion)	3.40	.901	Medium
overall	3.36	.413	Medium

IT Skills Practices

The mean scores of IT skills practices were at the medium of 3.30. Furthermore, four indicators yielded means score at a medium level (between 2.61 – 3.40), they are entering and developing information, presenting information using it skills, creating new information and using software. The finding implied that participants

were not performing IT skills well in terms of the indicators in their learning activities. Hence, the students revealed the practices of IT skills in terms of looking for information from e- resources and developing the structure of a presentation at high level.

Table 4. Overall mean and level of it skills practices

IT Skills	Mean	S.td	Level
Looking for information from e- resources and printed resources.	3.66	.931	High
Entering and developing information in varies form	3.11	.724	Medium
Presenting information using IT skills to suit different purposes.	3.31	.820	Medium
Creating new information by comparing it from various sources.	3.33	.846	Medium
Using software or application features to improve work efficiency.	3.09	.916	Medium
Developing the structure of a presentation	3.42	.860	High
Overall	3.30	.610	Medium

Numeracy Skills Practices

Table 5 shows that the overall mean score of numeracy was at a medium level (mean score 3.03). All indicators of numeracy skills yielded a mean score at a medium level (between 2.61 – 3.40). This finding signified that the participants in this study did not frequently practice the numeracy skills during their study at the research site. While current working places, future teachers must indulge with the numeracy skills, for instance, in managing time, making job priorities, reporting working progress, etc.

Table 5. Overall mean and level of numeracy skills practices

Numeracy	Mean	S.td	Level
Reading and understanding tables, charts, graphs and numbers	3.03	.800	Medium
Reading scales on measuring equipment	2.59	.835	Medium
Using effective ways to present findings	3.20	.683	Medium
Constructing and labeling tables, charts and graphs	2.83	.665	Medium
Assessing the effectiveness of my work	2.98	.788	Medium
Monitoring and reflecting on my use of numeracy	2.72	.737	Medium
Identifying the relevant information sources and outcomes	3.20	.855	Medium

Learning How to Learn

Table 6 displays the practices of learning how to learn skills (LHLS). Overall, participants were at a medium level (mean score 3.32). When we looked at indicators of learning how to learn skills, it showed that seven of eight indicators were practiced at a medium level (mean between 2.61 – 3.40). The seventh indicators were setting and planning, managing time and prioritizing, working and learning independently, identifying better ways of learning, putting together knowledge, reviewing what had learned and what had not, and consulting way and performance of learning. These indicate that the EFL student teachers were not strongly prepared to be a lifelong learner.

Table 6. Overall mean and level of lhls practices

Learning How to Learn	Mean	S.td	Level
Improving performance in the quality and way of work	3.64	.587	High
Setting and planning realistic targets of work	3.16	.636	Medium
Managing time and prioritizing works to meet the deadlines	3.35	.804	Medium
Working and learning independently	3.27	.787	Medium
Identifying better ways of learning	3.37	.875	Medium
Putting together knowledge from different courses	3.51	.693	Medium
Reviewing what had learned and what had not	3.33	.777	Medium
Consulting way and performance of learning to a lecturer	2.87	.891	Medium
Adapting learning strategy	3.42	.837	Medium
Overall	3.32	.461	Medium

Problem Solving Skills

The findings in Table 7 showed that problem-solving skills in overall were practiced at the medium (3.22). Further analysis in each indicator of problem solving skills revealed that there was no indicator obtain a mean score at a high level, nevertheless all indicators were at a medium level. These findings implied that participants were not strongly promoted with the problem solving skills.

Table 7. Overall mean and level of problem solving skills

Problems Solving Skills	Mean	S.std	Level
Identifying problems in doing assignments	3.37	.830	Medium
Coming up with ways to tackle a problem	3.14	.528	Medium
Using different methods to analyze the problem	3.31	.796	Medium
Including and suggesting diverse perspectives	3.09	.956	Medium
Exploring ways of problem solving	3.33	.868	Medium
Getting and making efficient use of resources	3.16	.841	Medium
Presenting an approach to solve a problem			
Overall	3.22	.724	Medium

Team Work Skills

Teamwork skills are one of the necessary skills in order that the prospective teachers are able to anticipate facing challenges and multi-task constraints. Obtaining an optimal teamwork will come out with a high quality of working output. However, as displayed in Table 8, it showed that participants rated their teamwork skills at a medium level (mean score 3.40). All indicators of teamwork skills yielded a mean score at a medium level (mean between 2.61 – 3.40) except for ‘working with others on activities other than coursework’. In conclusion, the findings in this skills signified that participants were lack of practices of teamwork in their learning process.

Table 8. Overall mean and level of teamworks practices

Team Work Skills	Mean	S.std	Level
Working with others on activities other than coursework	3.41	.864	High
Having discussion in different race or ethnic	3.11	.861	Medium
Working with others on projects	3.53	.692	Medium
Resolving conflicts occurred in group work	3.51	.770	Medium
Sharing constructive feedback	3.40	.687	Medium
Seeking effective ways to keep team member motivated	3.25	.805	Medium
Offering ideas of using best resources in completing group tasks	3.57	.837	Medium
Overall	3.40	.499	Medium

Subject Competencies

The findings in Table 9 indicated that the mean scores of subject competencies were at a medium level 3.36. It was supposed to give a high to a very high mean score, due to these competencies related to their own subject discipline. Furthermore, participants perceived the practices of subject competencies in terms of ‘applying subject-content knowledge’, enhancing English through watching movies and TV news, and developing English through reading written English news at a high level. However, students perceived the practices of soft skills in terms of following statements; ‘discussing and connecting content between subjects’, explaining contents learned to classmates or friends, answering questions proposed by lecturer, utilizing subject-content knowledge in teaching practice, enhancing English through watching movies and TV news and developing English through reading written English news were at a medium level.

Table 9. Overall Mean and Level of Subject Practices

Subject Competencies	Mean	S.std	Level
Applying subject-content knowledge	3.42	.601	High
Discussing and connecting content between subjects	3.12	.952	Medium
Explaining contents learned to classmates or friends.	3.11	.816	Medium
Answering questions proposed by lecturer	3.29	.743	Medium
Utilizing subject-content knowledge in teaching practice	3.16	.818	Medium
Enhancing English through watching movies and TV news	3.74	.781	High
Developing English through Reading written English news	3.57	.943	High
Overall	3.36	.413	Medium

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this current study was to examine and document the practices of soft skills (communication, IT, numeracy, learning how to learn, problem solving, working with others, and subject-specific competencies) among English as foreign language (EFL) student teachers at one public university teacher education program in Jambi, Indonesia. The study centred on examining the level of soft skills practised by EFL student teachers in their learning process and the level of student engagement in every statement of soft skill components. In general, the findings indicated that EFL student teachers were able to distinguish clearly between the seven components of the soft skill-set (communication, IT, numeracy, problem solving, learning how to learn, Team Work, and subject-specific competencies). They were able to reflect on their own level of soft skills and to

identify which of the seven skills they practised. In addition, EFL student teachers demonstrated a medium rating of soft skills; they needed to be encouraged for having the practices of communication, IT, numeracy, learning how to learn, problem solving, Team Work, subject-specific competencies, and overall soft skills of their students. They must be able to comprehend and analyse current and future work challenges with a critical mind and to use their soft skills to develop their self-quality, to succeed in their career, and to satisfy stakeholders. It is particularly important, due to the lack of soft skills practices among participants. Policymakers at faculty and department levels should encourage lecturers to implement learning activities that aim to improve students' soft skills to ensure a minimum mean score of 3.41 to 4.20, that is, the 'high level' banding of soft skills.

Previous literature has indicated that graduates should leave higher education better and stronger than as they enter it. This improvement should be attributable to curriculum. Graduates need to be equipped with soft skills that they can use to 'sell themselves' to employers. By practising these soft skills in and outside of the classroom will enable students to become more effective and independent learners during their studies. In addition, it will enhance their employment prospects following their graduation. In short, the university graduate should leave with three main attributes, namely employability, life-long learning, and good citizenship (QCA, 2000; Jelas et al., 2006; Washer, 2007; Star & Hammer, 2007).

What do we learn from our findings? Our study results shed important light on what might result in EFL student teachers rated their overall soft skills practices at the average of level of mean scores. First, there might be no guidance curriculum implementation or a blue print at university, faculty and department levels for embedding soft-skills into teaching and learning process. The second, there might be no thoughtful plans and actions in lecturers' syllabi and lesson plans to encourage their students with soft skills as faculty and university do not suggest to do so. The third, there might no standard input, process and output. There might no strong commitment of policymakers at university, faculty, and department to plan, monitor, and evaluate the quality input, process and output of the graduates. Policymakers at university, faculty and department levels should address these kinds of soft skills in order to produce quality future teachers who will have long-term commitment in teaching (Sulistiyo, et al., 2016; 2017; Mukminin, et al., 2017a; 2017b; Muazza, et al., 2016) or other areas of education that they are interested in.

Our findings should be considered in light of some limitations. Although our results may possibly extend the kind of facts on the practices of soft skills among English as foreign language (EFL) student teachers at one public university teacher education program, our small sample size may not be representative of all EFL student teachers. Future quantitative or qualitative or mixed methods research may include a larger sample of EFL student teachers from different areas.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this current study was to document the practices of soft skills among English as foreign language (EFL) student teachers at one public university teacher education program in Jambi, Indonesia. The study centred on: What is the level of soft skills practised by EFL student teachers in their learning process? What is the level of student engagement in every statement of soft skill components including communication, numeracy, IT, learning how to learn, problem solving, teamwork, and subject-specific competencies? The findings of the study showed the mean score of soft skills practices in overall (3.28 of 5.00) which was at an average level. A closer examination of the mean score given by the EFL student teachers to each soft skill showed that the practices of communication, IT, numeracy, learning how to learn, problem solving, and Team Work were at a medium level (see Table 2). The findings implied that the soft skills were not well-blended and practiced in learning and teaching process at the research site.

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