

Students' perception of the impact of teaching approaches on acquiring soft skills: an example of research in the context of Italian and German language teaching at the university level

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to examine the attitude of undergraduate students of Italian and German language and literature towards the impact of different teaching approaches on the acquisition of certain combined skills, called *soft skills*. Previous research has shown that possessing a wide range of soft skills is useful for all professions since they encompass personal development management, problem-solving skills, competent time management skills, communication skills, leadership skills, etc. They are, therefore, indispensable factors for the teaching profession as well. A total number of 41 undergraduate Italian and German language students participated in the research. The survey was conducted online in the period from February 21 to March 17, 2022. The obtained results can serve as an indicator of a successful foreign language teaching process and guidelines for all the teaching methodologies aiming at the development of a wide repertoire of skills necessary for realisation and functioning in the modern socio-economic and cultural context.

Keywords¹

Soft skills, teaching approaches, student, methodology, German and Italian

1. Introduction

The rapidly changing world, globalization of the world economy, changes in the labour market, digitalization and strong technological development pose new challenges to contemporary society. In the changed socio-economic and cultural context, education and training have the task of developing, from a lifelong learning perspective, a varied repertoire of interpersonal skills necessary to relate and contribute to modern society. Soft skills are at least as important in life as hard skills. The junior staff cannot enter the labour market today without having developed social skills such as team and communication skills, critical ability, self-reflection, independent learning, quality awareness and presentation techniques [9]. But how can these skills be taught? [8]. How are the trainees turned into

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team players and self-reflecting employees constantly educating themselves and bringing a high level of quality awareness to the work? [12]. The research presented in this paper has been motivated by the need for the inclusion and development of soft skills in the training of Italian and German L2 university students. It is necessary to analyse and rethink the syllables for Italian and German L2 at the university level and design new training courses that explicitly integrate the development of soft skills. The aim of this research is to examine the perception of undergraduate students of Italian and German language and literature with regard to the effects of the teaching approaches on the acquisition of *soft skills*. Previous research revealed that possession of soft skills is useful for all professions, especially educators. Since these skills encompass personality development management, problem-solving skills, competent time management, communication skills, leadership skills, etc., they represent indispensable factors in the teaching profession.

2. Development and importance of soft skills

Soft skills are those key competencies or key qualifications in the professional world that go beyond pure job qualifications. Soft skills are personality traits, abilities and attitudes that are independent of professional requirements and competencies [4]. Along with the technical and job-related skills (called *hard skills*), they enable effective action. When it comes to soft skills, a distinction is usually made between methodological, social and personal competencies. In 1998, this term was included in the Loskant trend word lexicon [8]. The term is particularly common in human resources management: *Soft skills not only describe the effect on others, but also one's own driving force, ability to concentrate, and discipline* [8]. Soft skills are part of social competence, social-communicative competence, a group of skills that serve to take over control in communication and interaction situations according to the needs of the interactants and to enable them to act effectively [9]. The abilities included are teamwork and some psychological and social skills such as sensibility for the working methods, for needs and feelings of others and understanding of human nature in order to prevent or resolve conflicts [3], [2]. The following are often mentioned as important soft skills: the ability to communicate, ability to take criticism, adaptability, ability to deal with conflict, initiative, conscientiousness, assertiveness and persuasiveness, problem-solving skills, self-discipline and goal orientation, organizational talent but also rhetoric and presentation techniques, language skills and intercultural skills and a sense of responsibility [11], [6]. Soft skills are important in all areas and professions in which people communicate [5], above all in the areas of business, politics, and society that create and sell intangible goods. Creative mental work, effective and efficient teamwork, customer-oriented advice giving, and sales are all typical areas of application in which soft skills are essential [1]. The fact that soft skills are integrated into studies is not a recent invention [10]. Since education in early childhood through cooperative learning one becomes prepared for social interactions. Many courses convey the impression that only advanced, professional hard skills are important [9]. It could be true for the application-oriented courses, since private sector often requires extensive knowledge of various hard skills, especially in technical professions [7]. Humanities scholars, on the other hand, see themselves trapped in the university system because they do not learn any professional oriented qualifications [12].

1. Methodology

1.1. Sample of respondents and data processing

Of the total of 41 respondents who participated in the survey, 52.5% are Italian language students, 32.5% German language students, and 15% of the participants studying both languages. The majority of participants are first-year undergraduate students (45%), while second year and third-year undergraduate students make up 27.5% each.

The survey was conducted online from February 21 to March 17, 2022. Data were collected and processed in the statistical program data processing (SPSS version 23) for the application of

descriptive and inferential statistics. In order to determine statistical differences between participants in literature and language classes and to define differences between individual skills with regard to the teaching approach, the Mann–Whitney test ($Z - p < .05$) and the Kruskal Wallis test were used.

1.1.1. Research questions and research hypotheses

The aim of this research is to examine the perception of undergraduate students of Italian and German language and literature of the impact of the teaching approaches on the acquisition of certain *soft skills*. 3 basic hypotheses are assumed:

H₁ The differences in individual assessments of soft skills with regard to participants in literature and language classes

H₂ The differences in estimates of the use of foreign language teaching approaches with regard to soft skills

H₃ The connection between methodological, personal, social and communication skills in the participants in literature and language classes

2. Results

In total 41 students participated in his study. As pointed above 52.5% are Italian language students and 32.5% German language students. Approximately 15% of participants study both languages. The results are recorded in Table 1 in the form of a ranking.

Table 1

Descriptive characteristics of participants (N=41)

		Frequency	%
Study	German language and literature	13	32,5
	Italian language and literature	21	52,5
	Both languages	6	15
Year of undergraduate study	1. year	18	45
	2. year	11	27,5
	3. year	11	27,5

(Source: authors)

According to the model of assessment of the teamwork in teaching, assessment model only 29.2% of students estimated that they agree or completely agree to put effort in integrating/motivating other students who do not participate. Furthermore, 51.2% of students avoid strong, dominant attitudes and 63.4% are motivated. For the other forms of teamwork students agree or completely agree with the proposed claim in a higher percentage (>78%). The results are recorded in Table 2 in ranking order.

Table 2

Teamwork in teaching - assessment model

	M	SD	%*
I respect other students/colleagues.	4,83	0,38	97,5
I pay attention to others when they speak and express their opinion.	4,53	0,68	92,6
I equally appreciate the opinion of all group members.	4,20	0,94	82,9
I integrate/motivate those students who do not participate.	2,95	1,15	29,2
I am able to put myself in the other person's place.	4,18	0,71	85,3
I avoid dominant attitudes.	3,62	1,21	51,2
I am motivated.	3,88	0,88	63,4

I express myself properly in speaking.	3,65	1,05	53,6
I express myself properly in writing.	4,08	0,86	82,9
I am organized in teamwork.	4,20	0,94	85,3
I am able to independently select the results of teamwork and present them.	4,18	0,78	80,4
I know how to structure and organize ideas so that I can convey them clearly.	4,20	0,82	78,0

(Source: authors) Note: M – average; SD – standard deviation; *- percentage of responses I agree and I agree completely

Furthermore, Table 2 shows that the majority of students (97.5%) consider that they show respect for other students/colleagues, that they pay more attention to others when speaking and expressing their opinion, and that they equally evaluate the opinion of their colleagues in group work. A high percentage of students (82.9%) and a slightly lower percentage (80.04%) answered that they are able to independently choose the results of teamwork and present them to other students. In the soft skills assessment (Table 3) participants had to estimate to what extent the teaching process enabled them to acquire certain skills. Figure 1 shows average values of estimation, grouped by basic soft skills: social, methodical, personal and communication skills. Students estimate in average that teaching made them acquire personal skills (M=3.87; Table 3; Figure 1). Students estimate on average that they acquired personal skills during the teaching process.

Table 3

Acquisition of soft skills during the teaching process

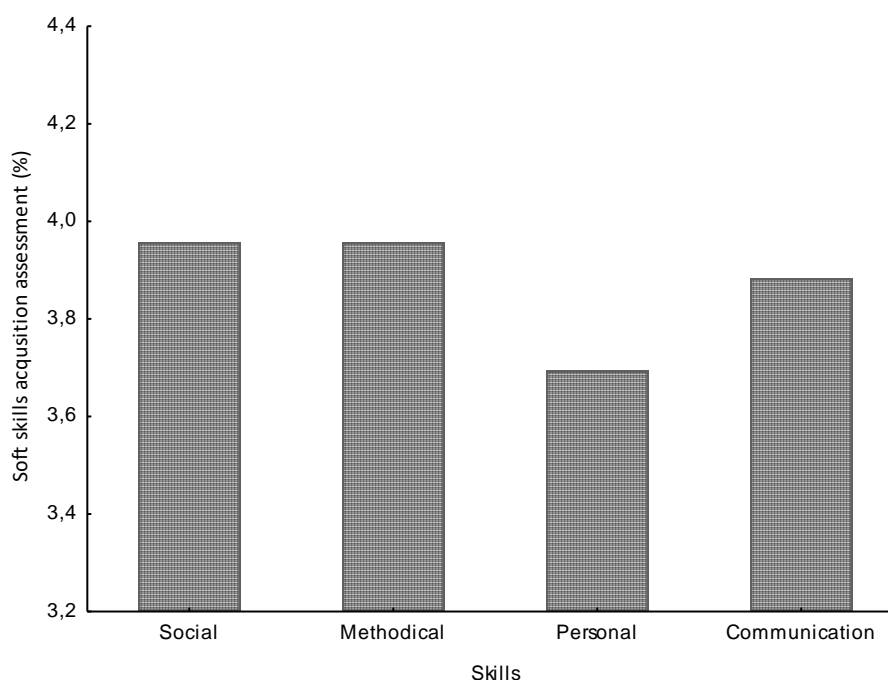
	The teaching process enabled...	M	SD	Overall M (SD)
SOCIAL SKILLS	Acquisition of skills in general	4,20	0,82	3,95 (0,18)
	A stress coping skills	3,63	1,19	
	Negotiating skills	3,90	1,08	
	Affective social skills	3,70	0,99	
	Advanced social skills	4,03	0,77	
	Basic social skills	4,28	0,72	
METHODICAL SKILLS	Creativity	3,45	1,15	3,94 (0,15)
	Organization skills	4,18	0,75	
	Strategic approach	3,95	0,85	
	Structured mode of operation	4,20	0,69	
	Problem solving	4,03	0,83	
	Flexibility	3,93	0,83	
PERSONAL SKILLS	Growth orientation	4,03	0,95	3,87 (0,20)
	Self-awareness	4,13	0,86	
	Controlling emotions	3,55	1,20	
	Self-confidence	3,69	1,13	
	Stress management	3,23	1,31	
	Forgiveness and forgetfulness	3,53	1,11	
	Persistence	4,35	0,70	
	Patience	4,10	0,91	
	Perceptiveness	4,23	0,80	
COMMUNICATION SKILLS	Rhetorical skills	3,80	0,79	3,90 (0,10)
	Active listening	4,35	0,77	
	Leading discussions and negotiations	3,70	0,97	
	Persuasiveness and enthusiasm	3,70	0,91	
	Nonverbal communication	3,70	1,04	
	Openness and curiosity	4,05	0,75	

	Networking	3,83	0,96
	Knowledge transfer	4,10	0,90

(Source: authors) Note: M – average; SD – standard deviation

Figure 1

Average values of acquisition of soft skills during the teaching process



(Source: authors)

In Table 4 average values of acquisition of soft skills in regard to literature and language classes are presented. Mann–Whitney test (Z-value) showed that the acquisition of methodical skills is significantly lower for literature oriented classes in regard to language oriented classes ($Z=-2,04$, $p<.05$) (Table 4; Figure 2).

Table 4

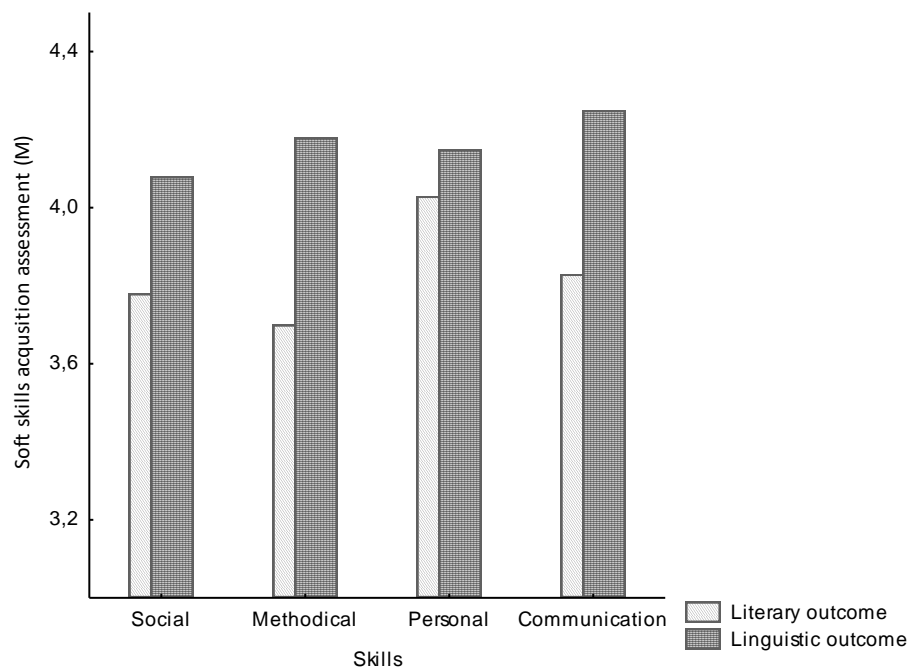
Differences in the acquisition of soft skills in regard to literature and language oriented classes

	Literature oriented classes		Language oriented classes		test	P
	M	SD	M	SD		
Social skills	3,78	1,07	4,08	0,83	Z=-1,17	0,24
Methodical skills	3,70	1,02	4,18	0,71	Z=-2,04	0,04*
Personal skills	4,03	0,92	4,15	0,86	Z=-0,62	0,53
Communication skills	3,83	0,98	4,25	0,71	Z=-1,89	0,05

(Source: authors) Note: M – average; SD – standard deviation; Z – value in Mann Whitney test; * - $p<05$

Figure 2

Acquisition of soft skills in regard to literature oriented and language oriented classes



(Source: authors)

Furthermore, correlation analysis results indicate a significantly high correlation of all skills (social, methodical, personal and communication) for literature oriented classes ($\rho = 0,48-0,66$) (Table 5). For language oriented classes, there are also significant correlations of skills ($\rho = 0,42-0,56$) except for methodical and communication skills where correlation is low and not significant ($\rho = 0,28$).

Table 5

Correlation between soft skills concerning literature oriented and language oriented classes (Spearman rank order correlation - ρ)

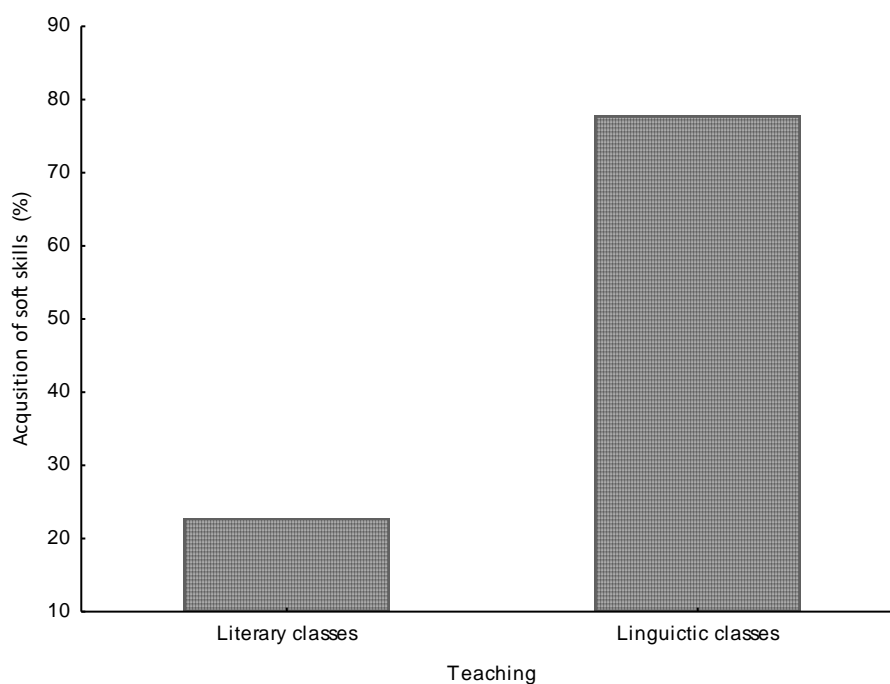
Skills	Participants of literature oriented classes			Participants of language oriented classes		
	Methodical	Personal	Communication	Methodical	Personal	Communication
Social	0,48*	0,55*	0,66*	0,47*	0,55*	0,56*
Methodical		0,58*	0,53*		0,56*	0,28
Personal			0,55*			0,42*

(Source: authors) Note: * - $p < 0,05$

When asked to estimate soft skill acquisition students in general answer in favour to language oriented classes (77,5%) in regard to literature oriented classes (22,5%) (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Acquisition of soft skills for literature oriented and language oriented classes



(Source: authors)

Table 6 presents the average values of different approaches to teaching a foreign language. Kruskal Wallis test results indicate no significant differences between skills in regard to different approaches to teaching.

Table 6

Differences in various approaches to teaching a foreign language

Approach	Social		Methodical		Personal		Communicatio n		test	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Communication approach	4,24	0,88	4,10	0,79	4,26	0,85	4,21	0,83	H=1,5 2	0,67
Oral approach or situational learning	4,11	0,80	4,05	0,72	4,03	0,84	4,03	0,87	H=0,1 6	0,98
Multiple intelligence approach	3,66	1,10	3,82	1,07	3,82	0,91	3,72	1,00	H=0,7 7	0,85
Neurolinguistic programming	3,79	0,91	3,74	1,04	3,82	1,00	3,74	1,04	H=0,0 8	0,99
Lexical approach	3,76	0,97	3,79	0,86	3,62	1,02	3,77	0,96	H=0,6 2	0,89
Ability-based language teaching	4,21	0,74	4,18	0,80	4,03	0,81	4,18	0,76	H=1,2 9	0,73
Cooperative language learning	4,11	0,80	4,08	0,71	4,13	0,77	4,28	0,65	H=1,6 2	0,65
Content-based	3,92	0,97	4,15	0,67	3,90	0,91	4,00	0,86	H=1,5	0,67

teaching										1	
Task-based language learning	3,84	0,97	4,00	0,76	3,69	1,06	3,74	0,97	H=1,71		0,63
Intercultural learning	4,03	0,99	3,82	1,07	3,87	1,08	3,90	0,97	H=0,82		0,84
Dramatic-theatrical approach	3,47	1,33	3,38	1,23	3,44	1,27	3,41	1,31	H=0,16		0,98

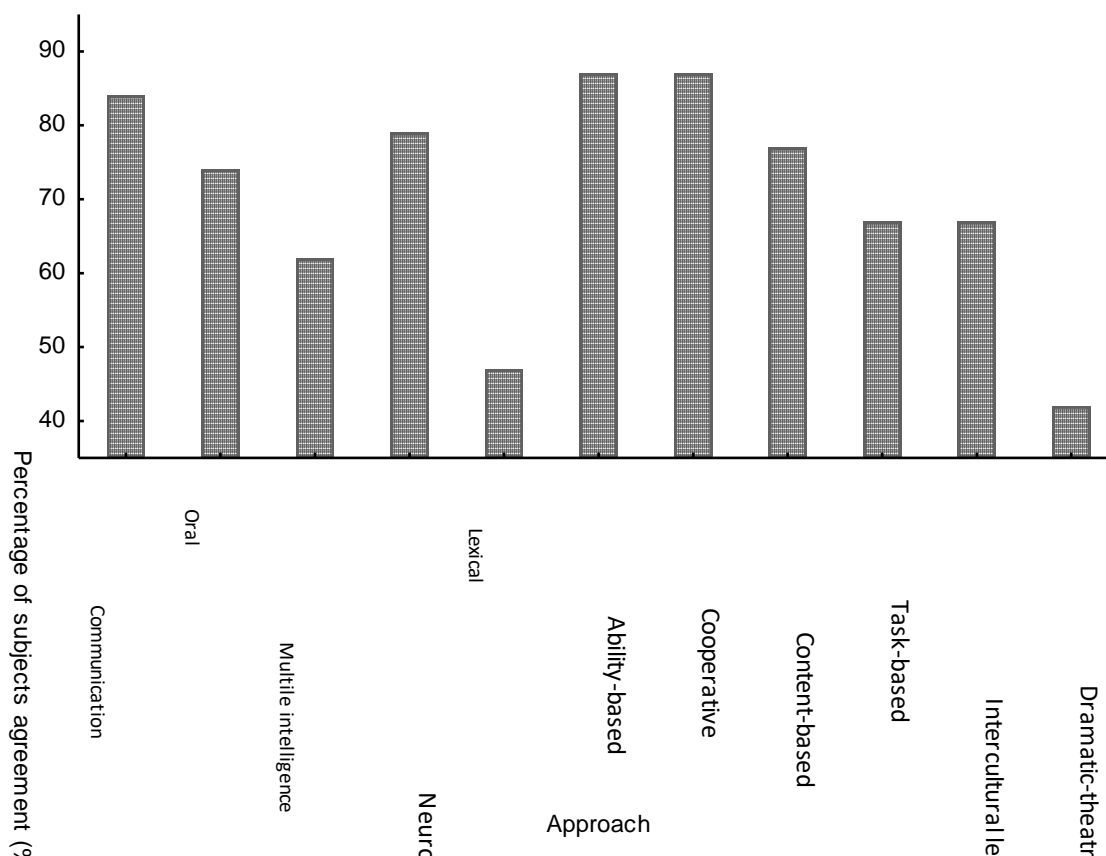
(Source: authors) Note: H – value in Kruskal Wallis test

When participants are generally asked to assess to what extent they agree (*I agree* and *I completely agree*) that the approaches indicated in Figure 4 are used in teaching a foreign language (Figure 4) only 42% of students agree with the dramatic-theatrical approach (dramatization of dialogue as a basic technique in language teaching). Agreement with the lexical approach is also low, found at only 47% of participants. For all other approaches, students mostly agree or completely agree with the presented claims (62-87%).

Most of the students agree that the ability-based approach (87%) (students learn the vocabulary and grammar needed for a certain type of communication) and cooperative approach (87%) (an approach based on the interaction and dialogue of the participants) are used in teaching a foreign language.

Figure 4

To what extent do participants agree (*I agree* and *I completely agree*) that the following approaches have been used in teaching a foreign language



(Source: authors)

(Legend: Communication approach (language is learned through use in communication, learning is a process of creative creation and an integral part of it is error); Oral approach or situational learning (teaching taking place without the use of mother tongue); Multiple intelligence approach (the goal is for the students to develop their kinetic and intrapersonal skills); Neurolinguistic programming (neurolinguistic programming perceives language as a way of expressing worldviews); Lexical approach (only necessary grammar is learned to put these language lexemes into sentences); Ability-based language teaching (learning vocabulary and grammar required for a particular type of communication); Cooperative language learning (based on interaction and dialogue of participants); Content-based teaching (it tries to obtain specific information, i.e. content that will be useful to the student to perform a particular activity); Task-based language learning (learning is more focused on meaning than form); Intercultural learning (understanding and respect for other languages and cultures and Dramatic-theatrical approach (dramatization of dialogue is a basic technique in language teaching).

Figure 4 indicates students' opinions on the extent to which they agree and fully agree that different approaches are used in teaching a foreign language. 87% of students recognized the variable *language teaching is based on abilities* and the same situation is with the variable *cooperative language learning*. The variable *communication approach* (learning is a creative process, characterised by the presence of interlanguage) is indicated by 84% of students, *neurolinguistic programming* (neurolinguistic programming perceives language as a way of expressing worldviews) by 78%. Furthermore, *content-based* is indicated by 77% of the participants, *oral approach or situational learning* (teaching without mother tongue) by 73%, *intercultural learning* (understanding and respect for other languages and cultures) by 67%, so as for the *task-based language learning* (focus on meaning rather than form) (67%). A lower percentage of responses related to the variable *lexical approach* (grammar is learned only as long as it takes to fit these language lexemes into sentences) (46%) and the variable *dramatic-theatrical approach* (dramatization of dialogue is a basic technique in language teaching) (43%).

3. Conclusion

Soft skills represent a multitude of personal values, personal characteristics, individual abilities and social skills of managers and employees. There is thus a large overlap between soft skills and social skills, but soft skills with the property dimensions and individual abilities go beyond that. In addition, soft skills, as personal dimensions, differ from soft factors that are the result of group-dynamic processes. Soft skills are the personal characteristics and behaviours that influence your own work and collaboration with others. This research has shown that the participants estimate on average that the teaching process enabled them to acquire personal skills. Regarding the agreement of individual statements in the model for assessing teamwork in teaching, most of the participants fully agree with the statement that they respect other students/colleagues, that they pay more attention to others when speaking and expressing their opinions, and that they equally evaluate their colleagues' opinion in group work. As seen from the results, a slightly smaller percentage answered that they were able to independently select the results of teamwork and present them to other students. These are exciting facts because teamwork is mostly used in teaching language courses such as syntax courses because students are asked to work in a team with regard to setting tasks in teaching. It was to be expected that methodological skills were acquired more in language courses and less in literature courses. For this reason, the data showed that most students believe that soft skills are acquired in teaching language in comparison to literature oriented classes. The Kruskal Wallis test results did not indicate significant differences between skills due to different approaches to teaching. The majority of students, more than half of the participants, agree that a skills-based approach and a cooperative approach are used in foreign language teaching, and less than 2/3 of students are of the opinion that a variable lexical approach is used in teaching. This might indicate that different approaches to teaching can develop different types of soft skills in students. Research has also shown that students studying Italian and German are of the opinion that soft skills are acquired in literature courses and not in language courses. All three research hypotheses in the paper were proven. Thus, there are differences in individual soft skills with regard to the literature oriented and language oriented classes. It is obvious that the use of different approaches in foreign language teaching influences the development of different soft skills and there is a connection between methodological, personal, social and

communication skills in literature oriented and language oriented courses. The research can serve as a scientific contribution suggesting the implementation of all the combined skills in foreign language teaching in different teaching procedures, both in language oriented classes and in literature oriented classes at the university level.

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