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FOSTERING STUDENTS' SOFT SKILLS VIA ONLINE FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

According to modern requirements, in addition to professional competencies (hard skills), students need to develop so-called soft skills, that include the ability to communicate effectively, teamwork, leadership, time management, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, problem-solving, and adaptability. The paper is *aimed* to study the features of the development of HEIs students' soft skills in the process of teaching English.

Training students in a particular situation of martial law has crucial peculiarities. The complexity of the access to education, the emotional exhaustion of students, and the increased demand for psychological support indicate the need for a comprehensive approach to language learning that goes beyond purely academic goals. In crisis situations, when some students live in front-line areas, other students are abroad, or some of them face psychological barriers, it becomes necessary to adapt educational content to the emotional and physical needs of students. Currently the educational process at Sumy National Agrarian University (Sumy, Ukraine) is carried out via distance mode: lectures are held online on Zoom or Google Meet platforms. In this context, it is important to combine flexible distance learning strategies, digital platforms, and active engagement techniques that allow for the creation of a learning environment with a powerful motivational and supportive component.

In the process of teaching a foreign language, favorable conditions are created for the development of soft skills using interactive methods (small group discussions, role-playing, and business games). In extracurricular work, an effective measure for developing soft skills is participation in English Speaking Club meetings, where students have the opportunity to practice English in an informal and friendly atmosphere. Native speakers from the USA, Great Britain, and Nigeria take part in these meeting as well.

Speaking Club meetings differ from standard lectures. The meetings are aimed at active communication and discussion of various topics. The instructor acts as a presenter, setting the direction of the topic with the disclosure of new, useful vocabulary and involving all participants in the discussion. By participating in Speaking Club and communicating with native speakers, students have the opportunity to practice the skills of spontaneous monologue/dialogue speech, and to activate their existing lexical and grammatical stock. Students also watch short videos and then engage in discussion and exchange of thoughts and emotions, which activates and helps consolidate accumulated knowledge and expressions.

An informal atmosphere facilitates overcoming emotional complications associated with the embarrassment of students to speak on camera and make language errors, strengthens students' engagement and motivation, increases confidence when expressing one's thoughts, and creates interpersonal interaction.