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Towards Academic Success: The Impact of Soft Skills on Foreign Language Proficiency among Moroccan University Students at the ENS

Ikram ELAYACHI ¹, Mohamed SALAH ²

1. Faculty of Arts and Humanities – Dhar Mehraz – Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University – Fez –
Ikram.elayachi@usmba.ac.ma
2. Faculty of Arts and Humanities – Dhar Mehraz – Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University – Fez –
Mohamed.salah1@usmba.ac.ma

Abstract

According to several studies, the standard of Moroccan students enrolled on university courses in foreign language education is often deemed unsatisfactory. In response to this issue, the Ministry of Higher Education has launched an action plan aimed at improving this situation, focusing in particular on the development of transferable skills. This article explores transferable skills and their fundamental principles in detail. It examines the different types of transferable skills as well as the strategies required to acquire and strengthen them. By highlighting the importance of these skills within the Moroccan university context, the article provides an in-depth overview of the efforts being made to address the challenges relating to students' proficiency in foreign languages and to promote their academic success.

Keywords: students – foreign languages – cross-disciplinary skills – academic success – action plan.

Introduction

Over the past twenty years, Morocco has made significant progress and implemented various reforms aimed at laying the foundations for multi-faceted national development. Significant changes in the field of higher education reflect this momentum, with an emphasis on both strengthening scientific research and adapting universities to the country's socio-professional needs. Considerable importance is attached to improving students' methodological, linguistic and communication skills, in order to prepare them to integrate smoothly into the socio-economic fabric, at national and international levels. In this context, Rizekova, I. (2015) explains that:

'Transversal skills not only constitute the fundamental processes of thought, transferable from one subject to another, but also encompass all social, cognitive, emotional, cultural and psychomotor interactions between the learner and the reality surrounding them'.

1. An overview of Moroccan students' proficiency in foreign languages

According to the Special Commission on Education and Training (COSEF) (2005), which expressed a negative assessment, highlighting the inconsistency of choices in the field of languages, which *'have most often resulted in a low level of language proficiency among pupils and students'* (p. 32). Whether in Arabic or other foreign languages, learners' language proficiency generally remains low, both in writing and in oral expression. Assessments and tests carried out at various levels and stages of the education system confirm this poor command of languages and the disruption it causes to pupils' educational progress (COSEF, 2004: 32). Even students who excel in their field of specialisation face detrimental shortcomings in terms of language skills, communication, adaptability and initiative (ibid., p. 36).

2. Definition of competence

The definition of competence is open to various interpretations, although it is often confused with that of abilities. According to Barbier (César-Pirard, 2012:15), competences are regarded as resources that can be drawn upon, acquired during training and intended to be applied in a professional context. In contrast, abilities are defined as attributes of individuals in their interactions with various activities, conceptualised through abstraction and regarded as a potential within those individuals. In other words, competences enable the application of knowledge, know-how and personal attitudes in a variety of professional contexts, with a connotation of autonomy and responsibility.

Florence Legendre, a French sociologist and researcher at the Picardy University Centre for Research in Educational Sciences, emphasises that the concept of competence first emerged in the professional and entrepreneurial spheres. In the 1970s, it began to gradually replace that of 'qualification', encompassing the skills and techniques recognised and certified by a diploma. In a professional context, competence involves an assessment of the employee's responsibility for the results achieved and requires a certain degree of autonomy to deal with unforeseen situations (On the Transmission of Knowledge).

Philippe Zarifian, a sociologist, defines competence as 'the practical understanding of situations, manifested through three types of behaviour: autonomy, taking responsibility and communication' (Afriat, 2006: 22). This definition emphasises the importance for the individual of drawing on both their own personal resources, such as theoretical knowledge, operational skills and social skills, as well as

external resources such as work tools, documentation and social networks. Jacques Tardif, a Canadian professor, views competence as "a complex ability to act based on the effective mobilisation and combination of a variety of internal and external resources within a family of situations" (Houchot-Robin, 2007: 12). This perspective highlights the dynamic and contextual nature of competence, which requires constant adaptation to different environments and scenarios.

Marc Romainville, a Belgian professor, elaborates on this idea by describing competence as "*an integrated and functional set of knowledge, know-how, interpersonal skills and the ability to develop, which enables individuals, when faced with a particular category of situations, to adapt, solve problems and carry out projects*" (ibid.). This conception highlights the need for individuals to be versatile and flexible, capable of adapting to the changing demands of the professional and social world.

The various perspectives presented by sociologists such as Philippe Zarifian, Jacques Tardif and Marc Romainville converge on a dynamic view of competence. This is defined as practical intelligence in dealing with situations, involving autonomy, taking responsibility and communication, as well as the mobilisation of various internal and external resources. Despite the sometimes-ambiguous definitions of the terms, the diversity of perspectives appears to add value, both in research and in practice. There are several initiatives aimed at integrating this focus into the teaching process within schools.

3. Approach adopted by the Ministry of Higher Education

From 2009 onwards, the Moroccan Ministry of Higher Education launched an 'emergency plan' which remained in place until 2012. This plan allocated significant resources to universities in order to improve the conditions for welcoming and educating Moroccan students. As part of this initiative, cross-disciplinary modules in languages, information and communication technologies, entrepreneurship, project management and innovation development were introduced from the first year of the bachelor's degree.

The national framework for cross-disciplinary skills sets out the skills benchmarks for the whole of Morocco, thereby providing each university with a foundation on which to build in order to promote its students' entry into the labour market. These benchmarks were determined in consultation with Moroccan lecturers and their industry partners, who identified the skills most urgently in need of definition. However, despite the quality of these current benchmarks, the question remains as to the knowledge, skills and qualities required of students upon graduation.

In an academic context, the development of cognitive-based cross-disciplinary skills primarily concerns the ability to assimilate, understand and process information, particularly in the field of declarative knowledge. This requires an interdisciplinary approach, as each discipline requires students to process information, whether it is conveyed orally or in writing. For example, when taking notes in class, students must summarise the key information. Similarly, when reading academic texts, they must be able to grasp the main ideas. Furthermore, they must be able to retain and apply this knowledge in new contexts, thereby demonstrating their ability to generalise and transfer what they have learnt. By developing these cross-disciplinary skills, students equip themselves with the tools necessary to succeed in various academic and professional fields. In the context of foreign languages, students engage in activities aimed at understanding and producing specialised texts or discourse. Their studies culminate not only in oral examinations, but also in the writing of a bachelor's dissertation at the end of the sixth semester, and a master's dissertation at the end of the tenth semester. The topics of these dissertations vary according to students' specialisms, preferences and chosen modules, which fully illustrates the cross-disciplinary nature of this approach. Lecturers act as tutors, advising and assisting students in choosing a topic, using appropriate research strategies and processing information effectively. During the final examinations, students must demonstrate their ability to analyse, synthesise, argue, justify and think critically whilst maintaining a degree of objectivity, which highlights the importance of cross-disciplinary skills in their academic journey.

4. Definition of cross-curricular competence

Transversal skills provide a framework for the development of general abilities that can be applied in various contexts or disciplines. These transversal skills are educational, as they draw on resources across a wide range of situations and promote the development of skills in several areas. They are characterised by their transferability, that is, the ability to recognise similarities between new situations and situations well-known. The concept of cross-curricular skills is gaining in importance in the field of education and training, with many countries adopting this approach, particularly in language teaching.

According to researchers from the Quebec school of thought (Langouche, 1996: 24), cross-curricular skills often conflict with specialised knowledge within a particular discipline. They emphasise that the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge involves mastering specific concepts, the ability to argue a case, to formulate hypotheses and to solve problems specific

to that discipline. By contrast, the development of cross-curricular skills requires a more holistic approach, applicable to various subject areas, and therefore open-ended and complex tasks, as well as an appropriate teaching methodology. These cross-curricular skills transcend the boundaries of academic disciplines whilst reinforcing their application in real-life situations.

There is an intrinsic link between cross-curricular skills and the subjects taught. To illustrate this, let us take the example of mathematics. In mathematics, in addition to simply solving equations, pupils must develop cross-curricular skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving and the effective communication of their solutions. These skills are essential for success in this subject, but they are also useful in many other fields, such as science, engineering, computer science and even in everyday life. Thus, cross-curricular skills are not limited to a single subject, but are rather essential tools for success throughout the entire educational journey.

5. Types of cross-curricular skills

Rubin (Cyr, 1998: 36) was a pioneer in this field; his established classification proposes a series of actions designed to help learners grasp or understand the target language, including: - clarification and verification strategies; - inference strategies; - deductive reasoning strategies; - resource-seeking strategies. Paving the way for other researchers such as O'Malley and Chamot (Cyr, 1998: 39), who expanded on his work by introducing new strategies for the development of cross-curricular skills. These researchers have enriched the body of knowledge by identifying and incorporating further effective methods and practices to strengthen these skills, which are essential in various areas of life. Their contributions have broadened the scope and applicability of cross-curricular skills, thereby offering more comprehensive perspectives on their development and use in different educational and professional contexts. Drawing on advances in psychological and educational research, the two authors put forward the hypothesis that second-language learning strategies can be grouped into three distinct categories:

- Metacognitive strategies encompass a range of reflective processes related to learning, including anticipation, planning, self-management, self-regulation, problem identification of problems and self-assessment.
- Cognitive strategies involve mental or physical manipulation of the material being studied, such as the application of specific techniques including repetition, deduction, translation or inference.

- Socio-affective strategies focus on interaction with others with the aim of promoting learning, encompassing cooperative strategies as well as the emotional management that accompanies the learning process. (Cyr, 1998: 36)

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has highlighted the vital importance of transferable skills at university, emphasising their fundamental role in developing versatile and adaptable individuals who are capable of meeting the ever-changing challenges of the professional and social world. These skills not only enable the effective application of knowledge, expertise and personal attitudes in various professional contexts, but also strengthen individuals' sense of autonomy and responsibility, thereby increasing their chances of success in a variety of environments. Furthermore, this article has assessed the level of Moroccan students in foreign languages, highlighting the challenges faced – notably poor linguistic proficiency in both written and spoken forms – and the repercussions of these shortcomings on their academic progress. This observation underscores the urgent need for collective action aimed at strengthening the teaching and learning of foreign languages in Moroccan universities, in order to effectively prepare students to thrive in an increasingly interconnected and multilingual world. In short, investing in the development of transferable skills at university is of crucial importance in preparing students for a future where flexibility, adaptability and versatility are essential qualities.

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