

THE STRENGTH OF SOFT SKILLS IN ADULT FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

In contemporary education, soft skills have become central to fostering resilience, adaptability, and leadership in learners. This article explores the intersection of soft skill development and foreign language instruction, focusing on adult learners aged 30 and above who return to language learning as beginners.

Drawing on spontaneous feedback collected over three academic years from Russian language courses taught at the Estonian Military Academy, the study identifies six core soft skills emerging through the learning process: leadership and self-management, teamwork, communication, self-confidence, work ethic, and patience. Rather than being intentionally cultivated, these skills surfaced organically through learners' reflections, suggesting a deep and often under-recognised alignment between language learning and broader personal growth. The paper situates these findings within current pedagogical frameworks and proposes that soft skills can be treated not as incidental outcomes, but as integral, and potentially observable, goals of language education.

Keywords: *soft skills, language learning, adult education, communicative teaching, self-management, teamwork, confidence, leadership.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the role of soft skills in education has moved from peripheral discussion to the centre of strategic planning across institutions and curricula. Communication, collaboration, adaptability, leadership, and self-management are no longer regarded as merely desirable qualities; they are widely recognised as essential competences for functioning in an increasingly complex, fast-changing, and interconnected world (European Commission, 2025). As Rutiku (2014) aptly describes it, „in the future, working life will resemble jazz improvisation – work will become less and less routine, and increasingly project-based” (2014). Higher education, in particular, faces the dual challenge of ensuring academic depth while also preparing learners to navigate uncertainty, solve real-world problems, and act responsibly in diverse professional and social contexts.

Language education is well positioned to support this broader developmental task (Medvedeva et al., 2022). Learning a foreign language is never solely about grammar and vocabulary, it is also about learning to think, to relate, to tolerate ambiguity, and to step outside one's habitual frameworks. These processes mirror the nature of soft skills, yet the connection is often left implicit – treated as a welcome but unintended by-product rather than a conscious pedagogical goal.

This article aims to initiate a more explicit and structured discussion on how soft skills can and should be fostered in the context of foreign language education, particularly with adult learners in mind. The focus lies on learners aged 30 and above – often experienced professionals and future leaders – who return to language learning as beginners. For them, the classroom is not just a space of linguistic acquisition, but also of personal negotiation: a site where confidence must be rebuilt, habits restructured, and new cognitive and communicative modes embraced.

This present paper emerges from the early stage of a larger pedagogical and research project that aims to explore how soft skills can be integrated into language education in a systematic, measurable, and transferable way. The paper does not claim to offer final answers. Instead, it sets out to establish a conceptual foundation: to bring together current research, pedagogical reasoning, and initial feedback from learners themselves in order to formulate a focused, empirically grounded inquiry into what soft

skills matter most in language learning, how they manifest in the classroom, and how they might be supported through curriculum and methodology.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The concept of soft skills has gained increasing attention in both educational research and professional training over the past two decades. While traditionally associated with affective and interpersonal traits such as empathy, teamwork, and communication, soft skills are now broadly understood as a set of transversal competences that support individuals' capacity to act effectively in complex, dynamic environments (Succi & Canovi, 2020). Unlike hard skills – which are specific, measurable, and often discipline-based – soft skills are generalisable, cross-disciplinary, and often more difficult to define, teach, and assess.

In the context of education, soft skills have been recognised as essential to student success, employability, and lifelong learning (European Commission, 2025). The 6C model (Varas et al., 2023) – comprising Critical thinking, Communication, Collaboration, Creativity, Citizenship, and Character – has been influential in framing educational objectives beyond subject knowledge. Other frameworks, such as the SKILLS-in-ONE questionnaire (Escolà-Gascòn et al., 2022), provide more granular descriptions of soft skill domains and offer tools for observing their development in educational settings.

Despite this growing emphasis, the integration of soft skills into foreign language instruction remains underexplored, particularly in adult and higher education contexts. Yet language learning provides uniquely fertile ground for developing soft skills and interweaving them with lifelong competencies (Ngang et al., 2015). By nature, language acquisition engages learners in communication, intercultural understanding, negotiation of meaning, and self-expression, all of which align with key soft skills valued in contemporary society.

Moreover, when considering adult learners (typically defined as 25 years and older) the development of soft skills takes on additional relevance. Adult learners, who often bring with them fully formed personal and professional identities, face additional challenges. According to andragogical principles, they are autonomous, goal-oriented, and seek immediate relevance in learning (Knowles et al., 2020). However, this group also faces specific psychological and cognitive barriers – such as fear of failure, performance anxiety, and time constraints – all of which must be acknowledged in any pedagogical model. When learning a new language, adult students often grapple with identity shifts and vulnerability, making self-confidence and perseverance especially critical.

The teaching approach used in the foreign language courses underlying this study is grounded in the communicative language teaching (CLT) tradition, which prioritizes meaningful interaction, authentic language use, and learner engagement (Richards, 2006). Within this framework, language is not viewed as a set of isolated structures, but as a tool for human connection and expression.

Furthermore, the courses reflect principles of humanistic pedagogy – an approach that sees the student as a whole person, not just a recipient of knowledge (Arnold, 1999). This pedagogical stance nurtures empathy, autonomy, and emotional involvement, all of which support the development of soft skills alongside linguistic competence.

Soft skills are also closely linked to leadership development, particularly in contexts where learners are being prepared for roles requiring responsibility, initiative, and decision-making (as is often the case in the military environment). Even when most learners are not aiming to become formal leaders, the language classroom offers a low-risk space to practise leadership behaviours such as active listening, clear articulation of ideas, and motivating others in group work.

Thus, this paper adopts the view that soft skills should not be treated as accidental by-products of language learning but rather as intentional and observable outcomes that can and should be fostered through conscious pedagogical design.

3. METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

3.1. Research design

This study is based on an exploratory qualitative research design involving thematic analysis of naturally occurring student feedback. The aim was not to measure predefined soft skills, but to examine how adult learners themselves articulate perceived personal and interpersonal development in the context of foreign language learning.

3.2. Participants and context

The data was collected over three academic years (2022/2023; 2023/2024; 2024/2025) from seven Russian language courses taught at the Estonian Military Academy. The courses covered beginner and lower-intermediate levels (A1–B1) and were designed for adult learners.

Across the seven courses, 105 students completed the courses. Written end-of-course feedback was submitted voluntarily and anonymously by 99 students, resulting in a response rate of approximately 94%.

Most participants were aged 30 and above, had prior higher education, and were active military officers (also 5 NCOs). All participants were non-native speakers of Russian.

The courses themselves were intensive and communicatively oriented (Richards, 2006), designed for adult learners, many of whom were already experienced professionals or in leadership positions. The teaching philosophy emphasized oral communication, colloquial language (Stadler & Kaltseis, 2024), learner autonomy, and active participation through individual, pair, and group activities. While grammar and vocabulary were addressed systematically, the primary focus was on functional use of language, building learner confidence, and facilitating real-life communicative competence. Teaching took place in varied formats, including contact teaching, online learning, and hybrid models, and incorporated a wide range of materials such as printed handouts, digital tools (e.g. WordWall, Quizlet, Duolingo), news media, and student-generated presentations.

3.3. Data collection

The data consists of open-ended written feedback collected as part of standard course evaluations at the end of each course. Students were invited to comment freely on their learning experience, including course structure, teaching methods, challenges, and perceived progress. Importantly, no questions explicitly referred to soft skills, leadership, or personal development.

3.4. Coding and analysis

The analysis followed a qualitative thematic coding procedure. All responses were first read in full to gain an overall sense of repeatable patterns. In the initial coding phase, segments referring to learning behaviour, emotional experience, interaction with peers, self-regulation, or personal change were identified as meaning units.

In a second phase, these meaning units were grouped inductively into six recurring soft skill categories that emerged consistently across courses and years:

- leadership and self-management
- teamwork and social intelligence
- communication and cognitive flexibility
- self-confidence
- work ethic and discipline
- patience and long-term perspective

Individual comments (197 in total) could be assigned to more than one category. Coding was conducted manually by the author.

3.5. Trustworthiness

The credibility of the findings is supported by the spontaneous and unsolicited nature of the data, the recurrence of themes across multiple groups and academic years, and the consistency between qualitative excerpts and descriptive frequency patterns reported in the “Results” section.

4. RESULTS

To provide an overview of how widespread each theme was across courses and academic years, simple descriptive frequency counts were compiled¹. Table 1 summarises the approximate number of student comments that included references to each soft skill category and indicates in how many of the seven courses each theme appeared. As individual responses often addressed multiple aspects of the learning experience, a single comment could be associated with more than one category. These counts are intended to contextualise the qualitative findings rather than to quantify soft skill development.

Table 1. Distribution of soft skill themes in student feedback (2022–2025)

Soft skill category	Number of comments (N)	Number of courses in which theme appeared
Leadership and self-management	~45	7/7
Teamwork and social intelligence	~38	7/7
Communication and cognitive flexibility	~52	7/7
Self-confidence	~56	7/7
Work ethic and discipline	~34	5/7
Patience and long-term perspective	~29	4/7

4.1. Key soft skills emergent in student feedback

Although not formally assessed, soft skills surfaced repeatedly across all seven courses and across three academic years. What makes this emergence particularly compelling is its spontaneity: learners themselves pointed to personal developments that extend well beyond vocabulary and grammar. Six competencies appeared most frequently across courses and years: leadership and self-management, teamwork, communication, self-confidence, work ethic, and patience. Below, each skill is explored through thematic insights and supported by direct student comments.

4.1.1. Leadership and Self-Management

Adult learners consistently demonstrated initiative and ownership of their learning process. Many comments reflected an awareness of how personal effort, planning, and perseverance shaped the outcomes – often more than the course structure itself.

“I wanted to do things properly, even if it took more time than expected.”

“Unfortunately, I had to prioritise other assignments.”

“If I had done it less thoroughly, I might have stayed within the time limits. But I wanted to do it properly.”

“Because of my level, I had to invest significantly more time into independent work.”

“Independent work often took longer than planned, but that may have been due to the depth of work I

¹ Frequencies were derived from thematic coding of open-ended responses; counts are descriptive and approximate, reflecting the exploratory qualitative nature of the study.

aimed for."

"The course was well run – any lack of progress was really my own responsibility."

These reflections demonstrate not only the challenges of managing time and motivation but also the emergence of personal responsibility and goal orientation, especially in balancing competing academic demands.

4.1.2. Teamwork and Social Intelligence

Students frequently emphasized the importance of collaborative learning. Whether through peer support, group discussions, or classroom dynamics, many recognized the role of the learning community in their progress and emotional engagement.

"Support from peers who spoke the language better helped a lot."

"Collaborative study in the dormitory was very helpful."

"It would be good if, for example, student X reads, and student Y is asked what they understood – it forces you to listen more carefully."

"The small group created a sense that everyone could speak up and participate."

"Working consistently in groups where the teacher accepted our mistakes (and corrected them) created a positive and developmental atmosphere."

"My own effort and support from classmates helped a lot."

Such experiences affirm that empathy, cooperation, and shared progress are not accidental by-products of language learning, but central to its social fabric.

4.1.3. Communication and Cognitive Flexibility

Many students highlighted the mental effort required to express themselves using limited language resources. They described how repeated speaking, reformulation, and interpretation helped develop their confidence and flexibility in thinking and speaking.

"From the beginning, we had to speak. At first, we spoke incorrectly, but by the end, it was better."

"An oral exam is a very appropriate way to assess student development."

"I often found myself thinking: 'How would I say this in Russian?'"

"It was very helpful when we had to explain words to each other in Russian – that really made us think."

"The focus was clearly on speaking – we had to talk about various topics in our own words in every class."

"It helped a lot that we constantly had to speak Russian and engage in discussion."

This metalinguistic awareness – thinking about how to express thoughts differently – is a core feature of both language competence and cognitive adaptability.

4.1.4. Self-Confidence and Psychological Growth

The emotional dimension of speaking a foreign language was a recurring theme. Many students described overcoming initial fears, gradually finding their voice, and gaining courage to engage more fully.

"This was the first teacher who got me to speak Russian – even during online seminars."

"The teacher's supportive attitude gave me a lot of confidence at the start of the course."

"I definitely understood the key topics better and feel much more confident speaking Russian."

"Interaction with classmates helped me overcome my fear and encouraged me to participate more."

"The focus on speaking (not just learning vocabulary) boosted my confidence and helped with pronunciation and sentence construction."

"The oral exam and the relaxed atmosphere during it encouraged open answers and gave me the courage to test my skills."

Together, these reflections point to a psychological shift that occurs when language learning becomes safe, supportive, and oriented toward student expression.

4.1.5. Work Ethic and Discipline

Learners recognized the importance of routine, consistency, and effort – particularly when faced with a demanding schedule or multiple responsibilities. Many also acknowledged that meaningful learning required persistence and personal commitment.

“Independent work took longer than expected, but that was due to the level of detail I put in.”

“Homework wasn’t overwhelming, but it was well designed and helped me improve.”

“Learning required persistence and focus, especially during such an intensive course.”

“Homework and using Duolingo helped reinforce previous material.”

“The lessons were well prepared and adapted to our learning pace – it was comfortable and effective.”

“I appreciated how involved we were during class – we got to do a lot ourselves.”

These insights reflect a strong sense of academic responsibility and self-discipline emerging through the learning process.

4.1.6. Patience and Long-Term Perspective

Finally, students frequently acknowledged that language learning is a slow, layered process that requires patience, resilience, and a long-term mindset. Rather than expressing frustration, many students framed this slow process as part of their personal growth..

“The course was intense, but very rewarding.”

“My starting level was very low, it took a lot of energy, but I’m happy with the result.”

“I couldn’t achieve all the learning outcomes – mostly because I lacked the time.”

“I wouldn’t change anything... I’d take this course again. Officers really need to speak the language properly.”

“If you’ve had two double sessions of Russian in a day, your brain needs rest. But it’s all positive.”

“The course timing didn’t support additional study – we had several major projects going on at once.”

These remarks reflect the emotional maturity that comes with accepting the real rhythms of learning – and continuing nonetheless.

4.2. Insights for supporting soft skill development more effectively

While the student reflections in this study revealed a rich tapestry of soft skill growth, they also contained subtle clues about the conditions under which such growth thrives – or falters. These are not "weaknesses" in the traditional sense, but rather thoughtful indicators of what learners felt they needed more of: structure, time, practice, clarity, and emotional balance.

Such feedback offers valuable guidance for both educators and institutions: it suggests that even well-designed courses can benefit from greater alignment between pedagogical intent and learner experience. At the same time, the comments highlight the importance of fostering students' own metacognitive awareness and responsibility as active participants in their learning journey.

The following themes, drawn from spontaneous student commentary, point to practical and emotional adjustments that could better support the emergence of soft skills in adult language learners.

4.2.1. More Structured Support for Independent Learning

(Supporting leadership and self-management)

Several students expressed a need for clearer organization of materials and expectations, particularly when managing their own workload outside class.

“We should be given the full A1 vocabulary list at the beginning of the course. Learners should be required to memorise specific word sets before each lesson.”

“Homework should be listed clearly somewhere, so that if someone misses a class, they can still keep up.”

These comments suggest that transparency and advance planning are not mere administrative conveniences but tools that help learners develop stronger leadership over their own process – a key soft skill.

4.2.2. Enhancing Collaboration and Peer Learning

(Supporting teamwork and social intelligence)

Students reflected on moments when interaction felt passive or underused – and suggested ways to make classroom dialogue more dynamic and reciprocal.

“It would help if, for example, one student reads and another is asked what the text was about – it encourages more attentive listening.”

“We need more discussion and questioning about the material... sometimes it felt like the text was just read, not understood.”

These reflections highlight the potential of interactive formats to sharpen listening, empathy, and active participation – all foundational to teamwork and peer collaboration.

4.2.3. Adjusting Tempo and Cognitive Load

(Supporting patience and psychological growth)

Some students indicated that the pace of the course was occasionally overwhelming, making it difficult to fully absorb new material or reflect on it.

“The pace of new topics was sometimes too fast... we needed more review activities between them.”
“I thought we would start from zero, but in reality, the course moved ahead very quickly.”

These insights point to the need for differentiated pacing, especially in diverse groups, to allow space for both cognitive processing and emotional resilience.

4.2.4. Creating More Opportunities for Real-Life Practice

(Supporting communication and confidence)

Learners frequently requested more authentic, real-world scenarios to apply their skills – a clear indicator of their desire to bridge classroom learning with practical, confident communication.

“We should have more group discussions on everyday topics (weather, food, health, etc.) – it really works and makes us think more.”

“We should go to Narva or another Russian-speaking environment and practice there.”

These comments reinforce the value of contextualized, experiential tasks that activate language in meaningful ways and support deeper communicative flexibility.

4.2.5. Timing and Emotional Load

(Supporting discipline and sustainable learning)

Lastly, feedback also pointed to external scheduling and workload challenges that affected emotional energy and focus – especially relevant in adult learning environments.

“The course didn’t fit well with the thesis-writing period – better planning is needed.”
“The schedule placed independent study and contact lessons randomly across all subjects, which made life harder for learners.”

These statements suggest that well-designed timetabling and manageable emotional load are not peripheral logistics, but crucial enablers of persistence, reflection, and growth.

5. CONCLUSION

Language learning is never just about language, it is also about identity, perspective, risk-taking, and growth. The reflections collected across seven foreign language courses over three years, though not designed to assess soft skills, consistently reveal their presence. This spontaneous emergence lends the findings added credibility: learners themselves recognize (often without prompting) that they are developing capacities beyond grammar and vocabulary.

What makes these insights particularly meaningful is the students' ability to observe their own learning. Many described how they progressed not only linguistically, but also through teamwork, disciplined time use, courageous speaking, and persistence in uncertainty. This kind of self-awareness is itself a crucial soft skill – and a life skill.

For adult learners with full lives, professional responsibilities, and only moderate intrinsic motivation for language study, it is significant when they perceive growth in areas like confidence, responsibility, and communication. It suggests that, when supported by a thoughtful learning environment, foreign language instruction becomes a space for personal development as much as for linguistic gain.

This exploratory phase, built on spontaneous feedback, provides a strong foundation for the next step: the design of a targeted questionnaire focused specifically on soft skills. The goal is to study these dimensions more deliberately and to align teaching more consciously with learners' holistic growth.

In short: soft skills grow when we speak – and when we reflect. Language learning gives space for both.

AI USE DISCLOSURE

AI-based language tools (ChatGPT) were used for language editing, and proofreading of this paper. No AI tools were used for data collection, coding, analysis, or interpretation. All analytical decisions and interpretations remain the responsibility of the author.

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