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THE BALANCE BETWEEN HARD AND SOFT SKILLS IN THE ASSESSMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TRAINING FOR NON-LANGUAGE MAJORS

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The traditional model of assessing foreign language proficiency in non-language faculties has long relied on the measurement of hard skills using standardized instruments, including grammar tests, translations of specialized texts, dictations, and vocabulary assessments [1]. Such systems offer clear advantages, notably objectivity, scalability, and well-defined evaluation criteria.

However, recent studies indicate that graduates who achieve high scores in traditional assessments often struggle to communicate effectively in real professional contexts. While they may accurately translate technical documentation, they often lack the confidence to present projects to international stakeholders or negotiate contract terms in online environments.

These limitations reflect evolving labour market demands, which increasingly require a shift in assessment balance toward 40-60% or even 30-70% in favour of soft skills [2]. Employers consistently report that technical knowledge and lexical competence primarily serve as entry points, whereas soft skills play a decisive role in professional success within global, collaborative projects.

The transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent hybridization of educational environments have introduced additional challenges to the objective assessment of foreign language competencies. These challenges include difficulties in assessing spontaneous communication due to

technical constraints, increased risks of academic dishonesty in online testing, limited opportunities to observe non-verbal communication, the need to adapt traditional assessment formats to digital contexts, and the complexity of evaluating soft skills in virtual settings.

In response to these challenges, a key trend by 2026 has been the integration of artificial intelligence technologies into the assessment process. AI-based systems are capable of automatically detecting lexical and grammatical errors, analysing the structure and coherence of written texts, providing personalized feedback, adapting task complexity to learner proficiency, and reducing instructors' workload. This enables educators to focus more effectively on evaluating higher-order communicative competencies that remain difficult to automate, such as empathy, cultural awareness, and creativity in argumentation.

Against this background, contemporary methodological approaches emphasize a shift from a dichotomous "either–or" perspective to an integrative "both–and" framework. Hard skills constitute the foundational component of language proficiency, as adequate vocabulary and grammatical accuracy are essential for conveying professional meaning. At the same time, soft skills determine the effectiveness with which this knowledge is applied in real-world communicative situations.

This shift is reflected in the increasing adoption of the principle of "fluency over accuracy" [3] in foreign language teaching for non-language majors. Within this framework, minor linguistic inaccuracies that do not distort meaning are penalized less than the inability to sustain interaction or articulate a coherent argument. For instance, an engineer who produces grammatically imperfect speech (e.g., "We was testing the prototype") but clearly explains technical issues and proposes solutions may be evaluated more highly than an individual whose language is formally accurate but lacks fluency, confidence, and communicative effectiveness.

Contemporary research further suggests that hard and soft skills should no longer be viewed as competing constructs but rather as complementary and mutually reinforcing components of professional competence. Strong technical knowledge provides the necessary foundation for communication, while soft skills enable its effective application in complex, real-world contexts.

Looking ahead, the role of soft skills and meta-skills – such as adaptability, critical thinking, self-regulation, and lifelong learning – is expected to increase as foundational language competencies become increasingly supported by machine translation and AI-driven tools. Nevertheless, hard skills will remain essential for ensuring precision, credibility, and domain-specific accuracy in professional communication.

In this context, the role of the language instructor is evolving from that of an "error controller" to that of a "facilitator of professional communication." Student

success is thus measured not by the number of linguistic errors, but by the ability to achieve professional objectives through effective foreign-language interaction within a globalized digital environment.

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