

Enhancing Professional Competencies Through Soft Skills Development

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Abstract

In today's world, mere technical expertise is not sufficient for effective performance in educational and professional contexts. In this case, soft skills such as effective communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, teamwork, leadership and problem-solving have emerged as crucial determinants of professional competencies and workplace performance. Within this understanding, this study explores the role of soft skills in enhancing professional competencies among English language teachers in Nepal. Adopting an interpretive qualitative research design, six secondary-level experienced teachers teaching English language in community schools were purposively selected for in-depth interviews. The gathered qualitative information was then thematically analyzed in five thematic headings. The findings of the study revealed that teachers intuitively practice soft skills as their professional practices, though their formal awareness is varied. Furthermore, the study identifies key competencies that teachers acquire through both formal training and self-directed learning, such as communication skills, interpersonal abilities, leadership quality, problem-solving capacity, critical thinking and rapport building. Finally, the findings of the study indicate reciprocal relationships between soft skills and professional development, which cultivates the personality of teachers and enhances classroom effectiveness, collaboration, and holistic professional growth.

Keywords: *soft skills, professional competencies, interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, teacher education*

Introduction

Today's interconnected world has been rapidly changing day by day, resulting in changes in many facets of its dimensions. In this context, educational and professional success heavily depends on more than academic expertise or domain-specific knowledge. Technical expertise, usually known as hard skills, is understood as a disciplinary expertise or academic qualification which is usually essential but often insufficient for effective performance in the educational and professional contexts (Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Robles, 2012). Contemporary educational frameworks prioritize interpersonal and adaptive competencies, termed soft skills. These competencies enable effective performance in dynamic, diverse contexts (OECD, 2015; World Economic Forum, 2016). In Nepal, these competencies are increasingly framed as essential for teachers navigating multilingual classrooms and evolving policy expectations (Bohara, 2025a).

Technical expertise alone might not be sufficient for effective professional performance in the 21st-century workplace. This shows the significance of soft skills in the employability and professional readiness of graduates for today's job market. In the same vein, employers frequently complain about the graduates who possess adequate technical expertise but lack the interpersonal, communication and problem-solving skills which are essentially vital for effective professional engagement (Schulz, 2008). Many scholars, including Beard et al. (2008), further express their dissatisfaction regarding the existing higher education system that especially prioritizes academic achievement, ignoring employability competencies such as initiatives, teamwork, critical thinking, and effective communication skills. Such gaps between the educational products and market requirements highlight the growing necessity of integrating soft skills development into professional development programmes.

Furthermore, the significance of soft skills becomes much more important in the educational context. Teaching, which is a fundamentally social and interactive profession, requires educators to engage with various stakeholders such as students, colleagues, administrators, and parents in a complex and dynamic socio-cultural context. Teachers must navigate complex stakeholder dynamics students, colleagues, administrators, parents within diverse socio-cultural contexts. In this complicated scenario, a teacher equipped only with content knowledge cannot handle the professional duties and obligations. In this understanding, a teacher needs to have soft skills to listen to various stakeholders actively, handle situations professionally, solve conflicts with stakeholders, and make judicious decisions to foster positive learning environments (Robles, 2012; Heckman & Kautz, 2012).

For this reason, educational institutions such as universities and teacher education programmes should play a major role in designing and preparing professionals who possess both technical and non-technical (i.e., soft skills) competencies. Ramsden (2003) pleads with universities to contribute to national development not only by imparting academic knowledge but also by equipping graduates with social and professional competencies required to address professional challenges in today's complex socio-cultural context. Thus, teacher education and development programmes aim to foster pedagogical expertise, professional responsibility, and social responsiveness, including core competencies such as interpersonal communication, counselling, leadership and lifelong learning (Krneta et al., 2007). In fact, many educational systems, including in Nepal, usually focus on academic qualification and technical knowledge/hard skills over interpersonal and professional competencies. While recruiting employees, including teachers, academic qualification is highly prioritized overlooking pedagogical skills, interpersonal communication, collaborative abilities and so on.

Consequently, most of the employees, including teachers, struggle with workplace/classroom management, effective communication, and professional collaboration, though they have technical knowledge. Due to insufficient knowledge or competencies of such skills, they face difficulties in explaining the complex concepts clearly, addressing the students' concerns constructively, resolving conflicts effectively and collaborating with colleagues confidently.

Conversely, teachers with soft skills often foster a supportive, engaging, and inclusive classroom atmosphere, promoting students' active participation, confidence and expected learning outcomes. Hard skills may enable individuals to secure a job, whereas soft skills help them retain the job effectively and professionally (Watts & Watts, 2008). In this view, integrating soft skills into professional development has become mandatory in the 21st-century workplace. In contemporary professional environments, individuals are increasingly expected to function as facilitators, mentors, and leaders, in addition to their technical expertise; consequently, soft skills are crucial for improving communication, interpersonal dynamics, workplace productivity, and overall organizational impact (Chea, 2024). Furthermore, the cultivation of these competencies can significantly foster personal, social, emotional, and professional growth (Subramanian & Banihashemi, 2024). However, notwithstanding the increasing acknowledgement of the intricate linguistic and classroom contexts within Nepal (Bohara, 2025a), empirical investigations into the systematic cultivation and application of soft skills within English language teachers' professional development are limited. From this perspective, this study explores the role of soft skills in enhancing professional competencies for the professional development of English language teachers in Nepal.

Changing Perspectives on Knowledge and Competency

In the past, educational knowledge and professional preparation were highly dominated by academic qualifications and theoretical knowledge on a particular discipline (Bohara, 2025b; Säntti et al., 2026). The practical social skills, interpersonal abilities, and adaptive competencies in the mainstream of education were usually overlooked. However, the intellectual traditions of “liberal arts”—that help cultivate critical thinking and disciplinary expertise—also consider practical skills and social abilities as secondary. C.P. Snow (1968, as cited in Schulz, 2008), in his seminal lecture *The Two Cultures*, expressed his dissatisfaction regarding the divide made between the “liberal humanistic” and “technical scientific” domains, which is irrelevant, unnecessary and detaches technical expertise (hard skills) from the interpersonal competencies (soft skills). Due to (post-) positivist/scientific mindsets of this era, technical expertise and academic qualifications are much more emphasized at the expense of social and emotional capabilities in today's professional development programmes and educational settings. However, early literature on human relations, management, and organizational psychology and behaviours has also explained peripheral issues of soft skills, such as human relations, leadership, communication, cooperation, and social competencies as the essential aspects for professional effectiveness (Carnegie, 1936; Katz, 1974). Formally, the term “soft skills” originated in the United States Army during the late 1960s to train the military to distinguish between technical skills for mechanical operations (hard skills) and soft skills (interpersonal and leadership skills) required for human interactions (Whitmore, 1972). Over time, as societies shift from industrial economics to knowledge economics, the dichotomy of hard and soft skills also began to shift. Therefore, educational reformers and policy-makers undoubtedly recognize that professional and societal development requires integrated competency frameworks including both technical skills (hard skills) and soft skills (Muzulon et al., 2025). Gradually, in the 1970s and 1980s, these interpersonal skills/competencies have been discussed in the

management and organizational behaviour. Moreover, Katz (1974) categorized managerial competencies into technical expertise, human skills, and conceptual abilities that enhance human or interpersonal capabilities and organizational leadership.

Thus, these decades marked a historical moment to redefine, reconceptualize and reshape the educational activities and strategies. The Faure Report (*Learning to Be*, 1972) criticized traditional education models that could not address the needs of a rapidly changing world due to globalization, technological advances, and socio-cultural shifts (Faure et al., 1972; Paneru & Bohara, 2023). They also propose key competencies—adaptability, interpersonal, communication, collaboration, problem-solving, and reflective management, and reflective self-management—that would enable individuals to adapt to and shape future societies (Faure et al., 1972). By the 1990s, workforce competencies were redefined and demanded in line with changes in the workplace dimensions. The Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS, 1991) in the United States initiated the concept of “workplace know-how” incorporating both foundational competencies (basic skills, thinking skills, personal qualities) and workplace competencies (resource management, interpersonal skills, information literacy, system thinking and technology utilization). Similarly, the Mayer Committee in Australia (Mayer, 1992) stressed the multi-skilled workforce with both disciplinary knowledge and interpersonal competencies for professional success. Collectively, these initiatives and these competencies have laid the conceptual foundation for soft skills.

During the 1990s, globalization and the emergence of knowledge-based economies demanded transferable skills such as communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, adaptability, and problem-solving. Scholars during this period coined various terms for these competencies, such as generic skills, employability skills, and transferable skills, which overlap with the concept of soft skills (Paneru & Bohara, 2023; Hager & Holland, 2006). Furthermore, employers frequently complain about the graduates who have adequate technical knowledge but are poor in workplace performance due to the lack of essential interpersonal and professional competencies (Robles, 2012). Thus, higher education and professional training institutions gradually showed their interest in soft skills in their curricula to enhance graduate employability by the early 2000s. Nowadays, in the 21st-century workplace, soft skills, such as emotional intelligence, teamwork, leadership, communication, and adaptability, are widely appreciated for professional success. In fact, these skills complement technical expertise and significantly promote career advancement and organizational performance (Goleman, 1998; Robles, 2012). At present, the concept of soft skills has gained wide popularity in educational and professional discourses, though, in early days, educationists suspected “over priorities” of soft skills. By the end of the mid-2010s, global educational policies, employer reports, and higher education frameworks highlighted soft skills as indispensable for both academic success and workplace performance, reflecting a paradigmatic shift in understanding professional competencies (OECD, 2015; World Economic Forum, 2016).

A recent meta-analysis in STEM education, a latest concept on education, prioritized the communication, collaboration, problem-solving, and critical thinking in its disciplinary

curricula (Rizakhojayeva et al., 2025). The findings of this meta-analysis further reveal that soft skills are not only peripheral but can be effectively integrated with core disciplinary learning to achieve both technical and interpersonal outcomes for professional growth. In this view, soft skills are closely interconnected with motivational and emotional processes, which correlate with positive effect and life satisfaction (Paneru, 2024). This indicates that soft skills enhance not only cognitive performance, but also affective well-being as well as holistic professional development.

Soft Skills and Professional Competencies

Soft skills are consistently interconnected with workplace employability, professional performance and career advancement across global contexts. These skills significantly influence employment outcomes and workplace performance (Deming, 2017; Heckman & Kautz, 2012), with the value alongside and sometimes above that of technical expertise (World Economic Forum, 2023; OECD, 2021). In this perspective, these skills and competencies are not only for immediate workplace effectiveness but also for long-term career development, aligning with a broader professional competency framework that integrates knowledge, skills and attitudes. The emerging role of these skills enhances professional competencies for initial professional preparation and continuing professional development programmes. Furthermore, they foster multi-dimensional and context-dependent abilities to experience, perceive and perform their professional duties and responsibilities across diverse environments. In addition, they make educational reformers and policy-makers refine and redesign their educational objectives, strategies and outcomes for 21-st century through systematic soft skills development.

Professional competence is commonly understood as the integrated application of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that enable individuals to perform effectively in professional contexts (Boyatzis, 2008). Within this framework, soft skills play a crucial role because they enable professionals to communicate accurately, collaborate with others effectively, think critically, and adapt to rapidly changing environments for their career success in contemporary knowledge economies (Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Deming, 2017).

Teacher education research further emphasizes that effective professional practice depends not only on disciplinary knowledge but also on interpersonal engagement, reflective practice, and conflict management. These competencies are integral to professional teaching standards and are increasingly recognized as essential components of teacher effectiveness (Krnetá et al., 2007; Sydorenko et al., 2022). The intersection of soft skills with professional competence is therefore central to understanding how individuals develop the capabilities required for sustained professional success.

Soft Skills and Professional Development in Nepal

Nepal's National Curriculum Framework (NCF, 2076) defines teacher professional competencies as the ability of teachers to apply knowledge, pedagogical skills, values, attitudes, and professional ethics to promote effective learning in the students. Professional competencies, in this sense, are not limited to theoretical knowledge, but involve the practical application of knowledge, skills and attitudes in real classroom contexts. It indicates that

teachers need to have technical expertise (hard skills) as well as non-technical expertise (soft skills) for effective development of professionalism in them. According to this framework, a professional teacher is equipped with eight major domains of professional competencies, such as content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, knowledge of learners and child development, classroom management and learning environment, communication and collaboration, continuous professional development, legal awareness and professional ethics, and ICT competencies. These competencies, similar to the competencies proposed by frameworks of UNESCO (2018) and OECD (2025), reflect global educational priorities and encourage teachers to shift from teacher-centered, lecture-based instruction to a competency-based, learner-centered approach. Across these frameworks, teacher competencies are closely interconnected to soft skills which enable teachers interact effectively with the students, colleagues and communities, manage the classrooms productively, and respond to diverse educational contexts. In this view, teachers with strong soft skills are more capable of facilitating learner engagement, promoting inclusive classrooms, and supporting students' socio-emotional development.

The discussion of soft skills in Nepal was introduced with the School Sector Reform Plan 2009-2016 that emphasized life skills, communication, teamwork, problem-solving and work ethics along with academic knowledge in the school education system to enhance employability and social participation (Ministry of Education, 2012, 2015). In the same line, National Curriculum Framework (2076BS) and School Education Sector Plan (2022-2032) emphasize on enhancing teachers' capacity to foster these competencies through continuous professional development, mentoring and reflective practice. These competencies in the teacher professional development programme extend beyond subject knowledge and pedagogical skills. They are interpersonal, ethical and adaptive abilities that enable the teachers to create supportive learning atmosphere and address the diverse socio-cultural as well as linguistic contexts of the classrooms (Bohara, 2025a). In brief, these competencies are interconnected to the concept of soft skills.

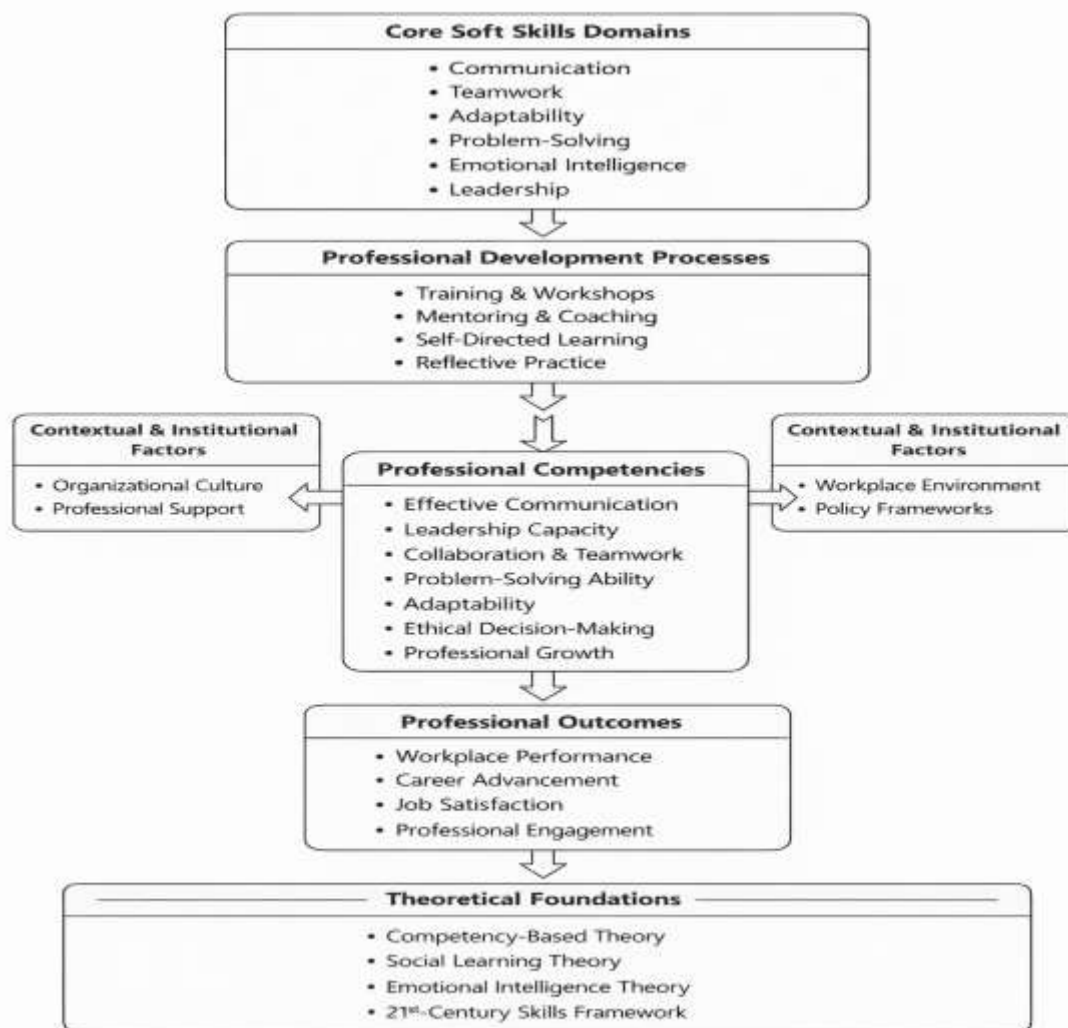
In this way, the integration of soft skills within teacher professional development has become a major strategy for fostering the quality of teachers and holistic development of the whole education system in Nepal. Similarly, the Soft Skills Project was implemented in selected schools in Nepal to enhance the teachers' quality in communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and ethical practices for their overall professional development competencies (Ministry of Education, 2015). This project supported the teachers by providing targeted training, mentoring, and resources to develop interpersonal, reflective and classroom management skills.

The development of soft skills in professional contexts, particularly in teacher education, can be understood through multiple complementary theoretical perspectives such as competency-based theory (Boyatzis, 2008; Heckman & Kautz, 2013), social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), emotional intelligence theory (Goleman, 1998) and 21-st century framework (Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1:

Conceptual Framework: Soft Skills and Professional Development



In today's world, soft skills and teacher professional development are interconnected to each other. At its core, soft skills include key domains such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, problem-solving, emotional intelligence, and leadership which can be cultivated through formal and/or informal programmes such as training, workshops, mentoring, self-directed learning and reflective practices. These skills can further be fostered by organizational culture, professional supports, workplace environment, and policy frameworks. In addition, these skills can be applied in professional contexts, such as classroom management, collaborative tasks, and workplace engagement, acknowledging the challenges and barriers caused by cultural and institutional constraints. Soft skills development enhances the professional competencies such as effective communication, leadership, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, ethical decision-making and professional growth. These competencies translate individuals' behaviours into measurable workplace performance, career advancement, job satisfaction, and effective professional engagement. In this respect, soft skills-integrated teacher professional development has been

strengthened by various theoretical perspectives such as competency-based theory, social learning theory, emotional intelligence theory, and the 21st-century skills framework. In conclusion, soft skills enhance professional competencies in a dynamic workplace and educational context, as shown in Figure 1.

Methodology

This qualitative investigation (Creswell, 2003) examined the significance of soft skills in augmenting professional competencies within the context of English language instruction. Semi-structured interviews were administered to six secondary-level English language teachers, purposefully chosen from community schools in the Kathmandu Valley; each participant possessed over five years of classroom teaching experience. To protect participant identity, all respondents were assigned gender-neutral pseudonyms (Nabin, Anubhav, Anshu, Nanu, Deepa, and Ram) prior to data analysis and reporting.

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The transcripts were read multiple times to ensure a thorough understanding, and then inductive coding was used to create initial descriptive categories. Following this, codes that were conceptually linked were grouped together and refined through repeated iterations, ultimately leading to the identification of five main themes. These themes represented teachers' understanding, development, use, and perceived effects of soft skills.

To ensure quality, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were upheld, alongside the practice of reflection. Ethical protocols—including informed consent, confidentiality, the no-harm principle, and cultural sensitivity—were rigorously maintained (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This approach provided in-depth, contextual insight into how soft skills shape professional development in Nepali English language teaching contexts.

Results and Discussion

This study has presented five interrelated thematic headings under the results and discussion section, such as understanding of soft skills and professional competencies, key soft skills for effective teaching and professional growth, experiences in developing soft skills, influences of soft skills on classroom practices and professional effectiveness, and enhancement of soft skills as enhancement of professional development. Each thematic heading presents participants' voices through verbatim evidence, followed by analytical interpretation and discussion in relation to relevant theoretical frameworks and literature.

Teachers' Understanding of Soft Skills and Professional Competencies

Teachers in this study demonstrate varying degrees of awareness regarding the concept of soft skills and their role in professional development. However, the majority of participants have more or less similar understanding of soft skills that might enhance professional development and pedagogical practices within the context of English language teaching. Nabin, for example, experiences "soft skills are very common and essential skills that everyone has....the question is how much and what type". For him, everybody has "soft skills as their intuition" that enhance their personality, i.e., personal personality or professional personality. However, most of the professionals, including teachers, "disguise their natural personality" with a formal or particular personality depending on their "given

role in a particular context". Such formality destroys the naturalness of their personality to practise soft skills for personal and professional harmony.

In the same line, Anshu states, "soft skills are key skills for personality and professional development". For her, "soft skills are social or personal skills that help individuals socialize effectively in their personal and professional communities". In the same vein, Nanu has viewed soft skills as non-academic skills which are not taught in school. For her, "soft skills are related to personal traits such as effective communication, collaboration, creativity, adaptability, problem-solving and conflict resolution skills which are acquired in their personal and social context".

Furthermore, Anuhav confesses "soft skills are hard to practise in real-life situations". For him, soft skills help individuals communicate effectively, collaborate with colleagues, think creatively and critically, solve problems, resolve conflicts and adapt in all situations. These are special skills that everyone might not easily and comfortably entertain. On the contrary, Deepa argues that soft skills are like inherent skills that are attached to the human personality. These personality competencies will surely help them for their personal and professional betterment. She added, "I find people with better soft skills, i.e., personality traits, are better than so-called academicians". In her view, an individual with soft skills visibly plays an effective role in society. Ram also has the same opinion on personality development for a better future and career. For him, a mere academic degree [without personality development] has been decreasing its value in today's job market and society.

Participants show diverse understanding of soft skills and their roles in professional development in English language classrooms. The findings regarding the professional role of a teacher force us to revisit the inherent "conventional given role" of a teacher to "a professional role with the integration of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours" (Boyatzis, 2008). These findings are consistent with Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which assumes that professional behaviours are shaped through observation, interaction and participation in a social context. Furthermore, soft skills complement academic knowledge and enhance societal and professional development and growth holistically (Robles, 2012; Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2017). In this view, these findings indicate that soft skills are both innate and contextually developed, essential for professional identity, pedagogical effectiveness, and sustained career development, which explicitly align with previous literature.

Identification of Key Soft Skills for Teaching and Professional Growth

Key soft skills can be listed in several ways, as scholars have a varied number and nature of soft skills. In the same line, participants in this study also have varying numbers of key soft skills for teaching and professional development. In this regard, Nabin lists "various competencies related to effective communication, interpersonal skills, classroom leadership, problem solving and critical thinking". For him, these are essential competencies for effective teaching and professional growth. Besides these skills, Anshu adds some more "competencies such as collaboration and teamwork, adaptability and flexibility, time management and organizational skills". For her, these skills are essential for fostering teaching quality and developing professionalism in English language teachers.

In the same vein, Anubhav expresses, “all the personal and social skills are included in the soft skills taxonomy”. He sometimes gets confused regarding soft skills and professional skills, as he finds that all professional skills are soft skills. For Deepa, besides many competencies, effective communication, interpersonal skills, leadership skills, collaboration, teamwork, creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, adaptability, time management, organizational skills, digital skills, conflict management, cultural competence, presentation and public skills, networking and mentorship are the major soft skills which play a crucial role in personal, social and professional development. Ram also agrees that all social skills are known as soft skills, which harmonize and humanize the professional roles.

Teachers in this study have identified a broad range of soft skills essential for effective teaching and professional growth. Nabin’s taxonomy on soft skills aligns with Robles (2012) who emphasizes communication, critical thinking, and leadership as key competencies for professional effectiveness. Furthermore, Anshu’s taxonomy corresponds with Heckman and Kautz (2012), who argue that such social and cognitive skills enhance employability and professional productivity. Deepa’s detailed list supports Faure et al. (1972) and Goleman (1998) that soft skills extend beyond interpersonal interaction and contribute significantly to personal and professional development. Anubhav and Ram’s view on social skills reflects earlier findings of Trilling and Fadel (2009), who highlight holistic competencies for professional identity and career growth. The soft skills taxonomy presented by the participants can be observed in line of the 21st-century skills framework as well as other theoretical perspectives. In this way, the participants’ perceptions confirm that soft skills—including communication, collaboration, leadership, adaptability, creativity, and interpersonal effectiveness—are widely recognized by experts as essential for enhancing professional competencies and promoting lifelong professional growth in teaching contexts.

Experiences in Developing Soft Skills

Soft skills can be cultivated in individuals through professional experiences, training programmes, informal learning processes and so on. Participants in this study also experience various ways of developing soft skills in themselves. In this context, Nabin describes his experience, “In the early days of my teaching profession, I was a rude, rigid and strict English teacher....I used to show my professional power and academic strength in and/or outside the classrooms, speaking in English all the time and being strict”. For him, he realizes his “unnecessary ego” that creates the “gap” between him and his students which hinders the students’ effective learning. He further confesses, “My own experience and study of numerous literatures on effective teaching have made me review my teaching strategies and modify my career”. His way of acquittance with soft skills is his own effort and exploration. Likewise, Anshu has a different experience regarding the acquisition of soft skills. To her, she started her career with an INGO where she has “acquired such skills as her working strategies [being, becoming and doing]” rather than a theoretical concept on soft skills. She initially understood these “strategies as the I/NGOs culture” rather than special competencies, as soft skills. However, she now realizes that these are “transferable and universal skills” for personal, social and professional growth.

In addition, Anubhav understands soft skills as social skills which can be cultivated in one's upbringing and growth. He implicitly remembers "I have read somewhere" that these skills are basic skills for better personal, social and professional growth. For him, soft skills enhance personality that enhances all spheres of our personal, social and professional qualities. Satirically, Nanu describes "soft skills as special qualities that hide a bitter world under a better [beautiful] carpet". For her, soft skills are the "qualities of diplomats" who fight with soft words, even for worse results. She believes that these competencies are somehow inherent, cultural and learned in personal and professional communities. Deepa, once sparked by a training on soft skills, is much more familiar with soft skills and identifies that soft skills are essential skills for today's personal, emotional, social and professional spheres. For her, though these are neither taught in schools nor at home, they must be learned by everyone to socialize in today's world. To her, these skills can be "acquired intuitively" when we are exposed to different environments. She believes that these skills can be acquired as a culture from home, society or school and through intuition. She further argues that learners should be exposed to a growing zone from a comfort zone for better learning of soft skills. Ram, who usually enjoys social gatherings and activities, argues that he learns much better and more in his communities than in school. His extroverted personality and vocal nature provided him with better opportunities than his academic certificates. He indicates that soft skills can be better acquired through socialization in general, and extracurricular activities in schools.

The findings of the study show that soft skills essential for professional development can be cultivated through professional experiences, informal learning, socialization, self-directed learning and so on. Nabin's self-directed exploration via his own experiential learning and studying literature on effective teaching aligns with adult learning strategies, experiential learning, and reflective practices (Knowles, 1980; Kolb, 1984). Similarly, Anshu's acquisition of soft skills through her work in an INGO demonstrates learning from organizational culture and professional exposure (Goleman, 1998; Robles, 2012). Moreover, Anubhav's experiences in soft skills acquisition in his upbringing align with the socialization and personal development (Heckman & Kautz, 2012). On the other hand, Nanu's perspective resonates with Trilling and Fadel (2009) and Faure et al. (1972), who argue that soft skills often emerge from social norms, cultural practices, and professional communities rather than formal instruction. Likewise, Deepa's insight that exposure to diverse environments facilitates intuitive learning of soft skills reflects similar findings by Mohamed et al. (2025). Finally, Ram's social and extroverted learning experiences highlight the significance of community engagement and social interaction in acquiring soft skills (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Bandura, 1977). In this way, these experiences confirm that soft skills are developed not only through formal training but also through lived experiences, reflective practice, socialization, and exposure to professional and community contexts, highlighting their integral role in enhancing teachers' personal, social, and professional growth.

Influence of Soft Skills on Classroom Practice and Professional Effectiveness

Soft skills are key competencies that harmonize and humanize the personal, social and professional settings. These skills, as human skills, help humanize classroom practice and

support professional effectiveness (Paneru, 2024). These skills support the classroom interaction, student engagement and teachers' professional development. Nabin, for example, experiences soft skills as "magic tricks" that change his whole classroom atmosphere from monotonous to enjoyable, less effective to more impressive. He agrees, "I have experienced lots of improvements in my classroom management, interaction, collaboration and tasks". For him, he used to impose his content on students in a monotonous style and environment in his early days of teaching. However, he has changed his way of teaching nowadays, such as listening to the students, understanding their comforts and discomforts, engaging them in the learning process, and supporting them emotionally. Now, he "finds his students with better and more effective learning".

In the same line, Anshu realizes the role of soft skills in her teaching. For her, "soft skills have helped me not only in my technical knowledge but also in my pedagogical skills and interaction with students". To her, she can make effective communication with the students, play her leadership role in classroom discussions, solve the conflicts raised in the classrooms and make her classroom lively and interactive. Through the enhancement of these skills, she finds herself as an "enhanced professional".

Ram has "paradigmatically shifted" in his teaching due to soft skills. He confesses, "I used to make one-way lecture method in the classroom and focus on completing my course". For him, he has completely changed his teaching and now makes his classroom more interactive and focuses on teamwork and collaborative work, where he facilitates them in need. He experiences his class "more effective both in technical teaching and practical classroom management". Likewise, Anubhav argues and agrees that he has "learned to teach" after he got acquainted with soft skills. Earlier, he used to read and paraphrase a text in front of the class, ask questions and punish the students if they failed to answer. Now, he has completely changed "teaching strategies". To him, he interacts with the students, asks questions, encourages them for answers and appreciates the efforts made by the students. To him, these strategies and competencies have "completely enhanced his professional effectiveness", and students have become better and more confident learners in the classrooms.

Deepa has appreciated the soft skills that "enable her to communicate with the students, handle the classroom problems and solve them, deal with the disruptive students, collaborate with others and manage the time and resources properly". She further expresses empathically, "I can now understand my students' individual difficulties in the classrooms". For her, soft skills have increased her professional qualities, resulting in students' self-confidence and enthusiasm in learning. To her, a teacher's professional effectiveness is not confined to only content knowledge; they possess interpersonal skills, time management skills, problem-solving skills, classroom management skills and so on for effective and successful teaching and learning.

The findings of the study explicitly indicate that soft skills significantly influence classroom practices and professional effectiveness (Paneru, 2024). The experiences of participants regarding the soft skills that significantly support the classroom practices and enhance teachers' professional effectiveness support the literature (Robles, 2012; Heckman &

Kautz, 2012). Nabin's magic tricks of soft skills that transformed his pedagogy align with Goleman's (1998) emotional and interpersonal competencies. Likewise, Anshu's experiences of soft skills beyond technical and pedagogical knowledge and skills correspond to Robles' (2012) study, which identified that communication, teamwork, and interpersonal competencies are the most essential skills for effective professional competencies and performance. Ram's paradigmatic shift reflects the views of Trilling and Fadel (2009), who focus on collaborative and interactive pedagogical practices. Deepa's experiences and appreciations are supported by Darling-Hammond (2017), who argues that effective teaching requires not only content knowledge but also strong relational and social competencies. In this way, findings indicate that soft skills humanize classroom practices, strengthen teacher–student relationships, improve classroom management, and ultimately enhance teachers' professional competence and effectiveness in English language teaching.

Enhancement of Soft Skills as Enhancement of Professional Development

Soft skills and professional development are interconnected to each other. The enhancement of soft skills refers to the enhancement of professional development in English language classrooms. Participants widely acknowledge that enhancing soft skills directly contributes to enhancing teaching practices, professional confidence, classroom interaction and overall professional development. Regarding this issue, Nabin experiences, “when I started improving my communication and interpersonal skills, my teaching also improved automatically”. For him, as he improves his soft skills, he improves his teaching practices and professional competencies naturally.

In the same line, Anshu confesses “for me, soft skills such as communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, time management, problem-solving, and adaptability are very important for my personal, social and professional life”. For her, when we improve these competencies, we automatically improve our personality, social identity and professional quality. Likewise, Anubhav shares his experience that when he “improves his communication”, he “could improve his teaching”. For him, effective teaching could be made through effective communication. Besides other competencies, communicative skills are key to teacher professional development. On the other hand, Nanu too shares her experiences that “technical knowledge refers to what aspect, whereas non-technological aspect refers to how aspect”. For her, a professional should have both knowledge and skills, “what aspect” and “how aspect” to deliver the content effectively in the language classrooms. These both go side by side as two sides of a coin. Deepa has a very explicit understanding regarding this: “if one has good personal skills, it will naturally influence their social and professional life”. For her, soft skills are personal attributes. As personality improves, professional skills naturally improve. She simply believes that improving soft skills automatically enhances professional growth. Ram concludes that professional development is not only about technical expertise. For him, when teachers improve their communicative skills, interpersonal abilities, teamwork qualities, leadership capabilities and adaptability, they automatically become better teachers. In his experiences, “enhancement of soft skills is directly related to enhancement of professional development”.

The participants' experiences explicitly indicate that the development of soft skills enhances development of professional growth and effectiveness. The findings regarding the competencies on communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, adaptability, leadership and interpersonal skills play a crucial role in developing and shaping personal and professional personality, aligning with the observation of Robles (2012), and Heckman and Kautz (2012). In the educational setting, the findings related to teachers' interpersonal and relational competencies that improve classroom interaction, students' engagement and teaching quality ultimately align with the views of Darling-Hammond (2017). Furthermore, overall findings of these skills that strengthen teachers' professional identity, reflective practices, and collaborative learning environments correspond to the literature by Trilling and Fadel (2009) and OECD (2019). In this way, soft skills complement pedagogical knowledge and technical expertise by enabling teachers to communicate effectively, manage classrooms, support students emotionally, and adapt to diverse learning situations. Therefore, the enhancement of soft skills functions as a key pathway for improving teachers' professional competencies and teaching effectiveness.

Conclusion

The findings of the study confirm that professional competence is a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours which can be cultivated not only through technical expertise, but also complemented with non-technical, i.e.; soft skills. Moreover, teaching is a social activity as well as an interactive profession in which soft skills are essential for effective engagement with the students and other stakeholders. Therefore, they need to demonstrate better soft skills in their professional activities. Despite their limited formal awareness of soft skills, teachers frequently practise them intuitively but implicitly in their professional roles. In this respect, soft skills such as effective communication skills, interpersonal abilities, collaborative quality, leadership traits, critical thinking, problem-solving skills help the teachers communicate accurately, understand others and respond emphatically, support teamwork effectively, guide to classroom activities properly, analyze the situation critically, and solve the problem constructively. Within this framework, these skills contribute to creating a positive, supportive, and inclusive classroom environment; demonstrate better classroom management practices; promote collaborative and learner-centered teaching practices, and effective professional roles. Reciprocally, soft skills can be cultivated through professional experience, social interaction and community engagement, organizational culture and professional environments, self-directed learning and personal reflection. In this way, teachers' personal qualities and professional efficiency influence each other. In this understanding, the development of soft skills contributes to teachers' professional confidence, professional effectiveness, professional development, and professional identity. Finally, the findings of the study suggest that teacher education programmes should strategically integrate soft skills development into their curriculum and pedagogy/andragogy for enhancing holistic teacher professional development. In this way, strengthening soft skills helps develop reflective, adaptive, and socially responsive educators capable of addressing the complex demands of twenty-first-century education.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Research Division of University Grants Commission (UGC), Nepal, for their continuous guidance and financial support in completing this research, awarded by UGC as a small RDI grant (SRDIG-8081-Edu-03) in the fiscal year 2023/24.

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