Soft Skills Development with University Students

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Abstract: The influence of game-based teaching at English classes with university students for soft skills development has been shown. The purpose of the article is to test experimentally the effectiveness of game-based teaching at English classes with university students for the soft skills development. The theoretical (analysis and synthesis), empirical (questioning, observation, discussion), experimental (pedagogical experiment) methods have been used. The pedagogical experiment helped to evaluate the obtained data. The article results are the following. The concept "soft skills" was established as well as the synonyms "skills for employment", "people skills", "non-professional skills", "extra-professional skills", "key skills", "skills for social progress", "skills of the 21st century". The eight soft skills that can be developed with university students through educational games at English classes were determined. They were critical thinking, creativity, team management, emotional intelligence, people interaction, conflict management, flexible consciousness and stress resistance. The features of the identified soft skills were described. The influence of game activities to different soft skills was revealed. Different game activities to develop soft skills were shown at English lessons. The effectiveness of game-based teaching to soft skills development was analyzed. The conclusion is the effectiveness of soft skills development based on game-based teaching in English was proved.

Keywords: *soft skills; university students; English; games; teaching.*

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Introduction

The modern world is changing rapidly, with increasing demand in all fields of employment. In order to be competitive, a graduate should possess not only good professional knowledge, but also have a number of extra skills, so-called "soft skills" which will allow employees to perform tasks creatively, make their own decisions, and work in a team that will facilitate the rapid development of science, industry and economy.

Over the past 20 years the concept "soft skills" has become an integral part of modern education. In many contexts, "soft skills" are used as synonyms to such concepts as "skills for employment", "people skills", "non-professional skills", "extra-professional skills", "key skills", "skills for social progress", "skills of the 21st century". Different approaches to the concept interpretation are caused by the contextual researchers' views.

This was emphasized at the World Economic Forum in Davos, where, along with the professions of the future, the qualities of workers that will be required by employers were being discussed. Therefore, higher education should aim not only to equip its graduates with professional knowledge, but also to impart to them different skills such as: critical thinking, creativity, emotional intelligence, interaction with people, team management, negotiation, and flexible consciousness. Such soft skills are needed in the 21st century (Doyle, 2017).

Unfortunately, such skills are not always the academic goal of university education programs. However, it is difficult for an employee who lacks the skills of communication and teamwork to become an effective team employee. In this context it is significant to emphasize that a hundred years ago, it was found that personal qualities were 80% of the key to success (Mann, 1918). Ch. R. Mann underlined a hundred years ago that fifteen hundred engineers, who replied in writing to the question: "What are the most important factors in determining probable success or failure in engineering?" mentioned personal qualities more than seven times as frequently as they did knowledge of engineering science and the practice technique (Mann, 1918).

Therefore, when teaching students today (Wats & Wats, 2009), it is necessary to choose such forms and methods that will contribute not only to the development of professional skills, but also the development of soft skills (Arat, 2014; Appleby, 2017; Hurcum, 2018).

Member States of the European Union (EU) have adopted a number of papers that allow the introduction of a unified classification of "soft skills". In 2018, 11 directives were adopted, providing for the introduction

until 2020 of new learning and teaching methods for the development of "soft skills" among university students in EU universities. Another important paper was the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). In 2017, an officially adopted classification and explanations were developed for it, called "European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations" (ESCO), which includes 1384 soft skills demanded by the labor market (European Commission, 2019).

Similar trends in the educational environment have spread all over the world. Many major research centers in the United States began to study the phenomenon "soft skills" as well including the Institute for the Future (IFTF) in California, USA.

Literature review

Many studies about "soft skills" have an interdisciplinary nature (economics, management, education, psychology, sociology, philosophy), some papers are devoted to definite professions and extra professional skills in the particular area in different countries such as Malaysia (Nganga et al., 2015), China (Yan et al., 2019), Colombia (Guerra-Báez, 2019), Russia (Raitskaya & Tikhonova, 2018), Israel (Naamati Schneider et al., 2020).

There are some papers to understand "soft skills" integration into university education in learning and teaching English. D. Price "explores soft skills and how to bring them into the English language classroom" in general (Price, 2015), E. Tevdovska writes about "knowledge beyond language learning" in English (Tevdovska, 2015).

To understand "soft skills" integration into learning and teaching English through using role-playing games in the classroom, we have conducted our own research. Since games are considered as a kind of developing social activity, a form of learning social experience, they have always been defined as the method of personal qualities development. No doubt, they contribute to a person's readiness for social practice.

It is known that games have an important role in teaching. The game educational possibilities have also been known for a long time. They are used by foreign language practitioners in teaching students of all ages to increase motivation to the subject, to focus on students' interest, and have proven them well in developing communicative skills. Different scholars pay considerable attention to the problem of the use of role-playing game activity in foreign language lessons.

In our previous works the effectiveness for the development of various academic competences via role-playing game activity at English

lessons (Kostikova et al., 2019), using cloud technologies (Holubnycha et al., 2019) are researched too. However, the impact of educational games on the development of soft skills as personal qualities while foreign language teaching has not been the subject of the detailed scientific exploration.

So, the purpose of the paper is to test experimentally the effectiveness of game-based teaching at English classes with university students for the soft skills development.

The objectives of the study are:

1) to determine what soft skills can be developed with university students through educational games in English classes;

2) to describe the features of the identified soft skills;

3) to establish the influence of game activities to different soft skills;

4) to analyze the effectiveness of game-based teaching to soft skills development.

Methodology

Research methodology

In accordance with the purpose of our research and solving the objectives we have used the following methods:

1) general theoretical methods, such as the analysis and synthesis of scientific literature on psychology, education, and foreign language teaching methods, to identify and characterize the soft skills as personal qualities that can be developed through games in teaching, and to determine which educational games are capable of developing defined soft skills;

2) experimental methods such as: questioning, observation, discussion, pedagogical experiment, to study the effectiveness of game-based teaching to develop certain soft skills.

Participants

The investigation took place in Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University (Kharkiv, Ukraine) and in H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University (Kharkiv, Ukraine) in 2018/19 academic year. 139 first-year students (experimental group) and 141 first-year students (control group) took part in the pedagogical experiment. During the academic year at every English lesson with the students from the experimental group the teachers applied different kinds of educational games according to the curriculum. The students of the control group were taught traditionally without applying educational games.

Research procedure

The objective of pedagogical experiment was focused on studying the effectiveness of using game-based teaching in English classes with university students to develop the soft skills. The research consisted of three stages: 1) theoretical study of the problem of soft skills (analysis of scientific literature) and determining the soft skills as students' personal qualities who participated in the experiment (questioning, observation); 2) conducting the pedagogical experiment itself; 3) analysis of the results obtained.

So, we hypothesize that teaching English based on game activity with university students influences the development of the soft skills. The comparing the influence results of game activities to different soft skills was carried out by the survey method using questionnaires. The surveys were conducted in Google forms in accordance with generally accepted rules.

Results

As it is known, the dictionary defines soft skills as "personal attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people" (Lexico, 2020). In other words, soft skills are a person's natural abilities. These skills are usually innate "people", "social", "key" skills related to personal qualities. They are not taught in schools or universities, but like any skills, they can be honed and developed through purposeful practice.

No doubt, soft skills become more and more important. We have grouped the skills and identified eight of them, which, in our opinion, are the most global and can be developed by students through the systematic use of educational games in English classes.

So, according to our ideas, the following soft skills were chosen for the research: **1) critical thinking, 2) creativity, 3) team management, 4) emotional intelligence, 5) people interaction, 6) conflict management, 7) flexible consciousness, 8) stress resistance.**

The questionnaire has eight questions as for eight soft skills. Every soft skill is connected to the question. The questions correspondingly the soft skills are: 1) How do you evaluate your skill to think critically: to filter what you hear, to doubt different thoughts, to analyze, to come to your own conclusions? 2) How creative are you, can you create something quickly? 3) Can you manage a team of like-minded people, build good relationships with the team? 4) Can you manage your emotions? 5) How well do you interact with different people? 6) Can you find a way out of a conflict?
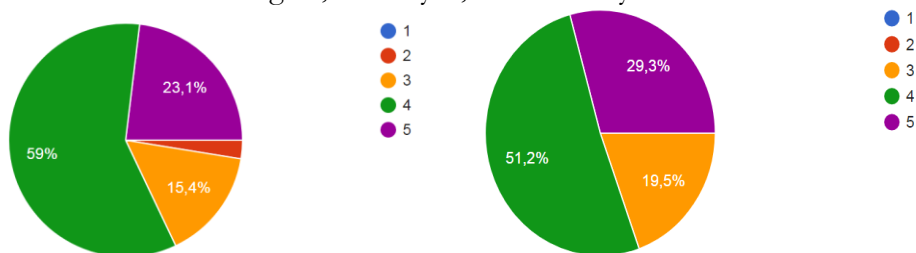
7) Are you focused on overcoming various challenges? 8) How stressful are you: do your attention, concentration, and memory suffer during a stress?

To evaluate students' attitude to soft skills development we compare the results before the experiment. We ask students to fill in the questionnaire in Google forms about eight soft skills. In the questionnaire we explain that soft skills are not related to a specific profession, but they are very important for a career ladder, they help to interact successfully with different people, the skills influence on the successful work. The range of the skill is on a 5 point scale where: 1 – the lack of quality; 2 – the skill basics; 3 – the skill is underdeveloped; 4 – the skill is quite developed; 5 – the skill is quite well developed. The data about students' soft skills development before the experiment in students' groups were almost equal, so we choose the group with a little bit lower results as the experimental one, and the group with a little bit higher results as the control one (figure 1).
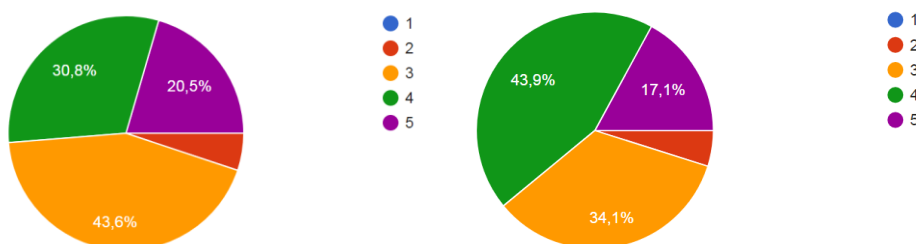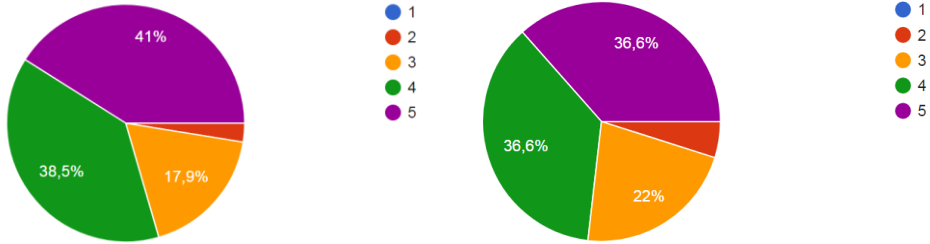
Experimental Group **Control Group**

1. How do you evaluate your skill to think critically: to filter what you hear, to doubt different thoughts, to analyze, to come to your own conclusions?
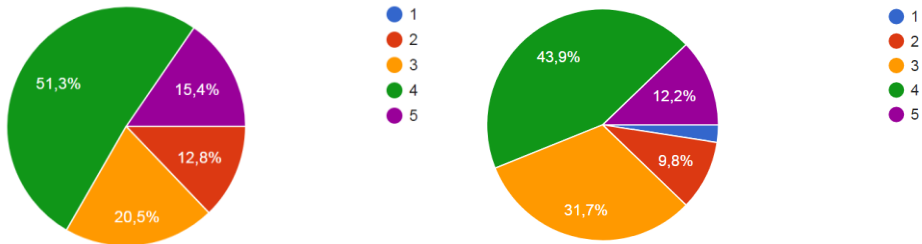

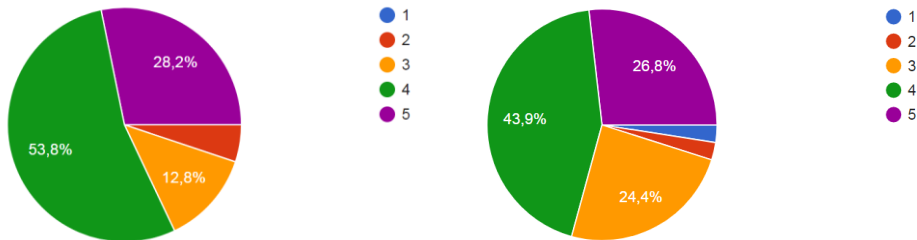2. How creative are you, can you create something quickly?

3. Can you manage a team of like-minded people, build good relationships with the team?
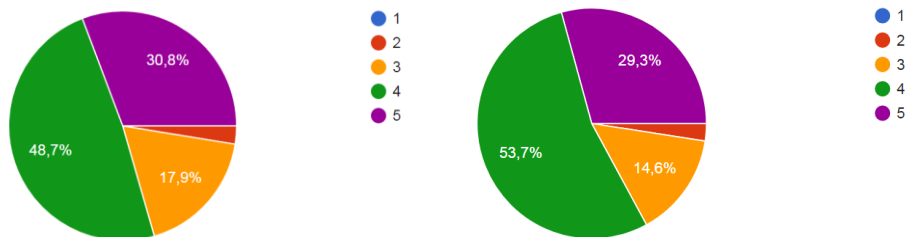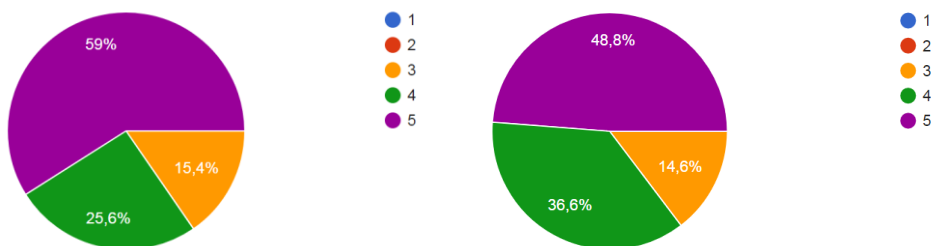

4. Can you manage your emotions?

5. How well do you interact with different people?

6. Can you find a way out of a conflict?

7. Are you focused on overcoming various challenges?

8. How stressful are you: do your attention, concentration, and memory suffer during a stress?
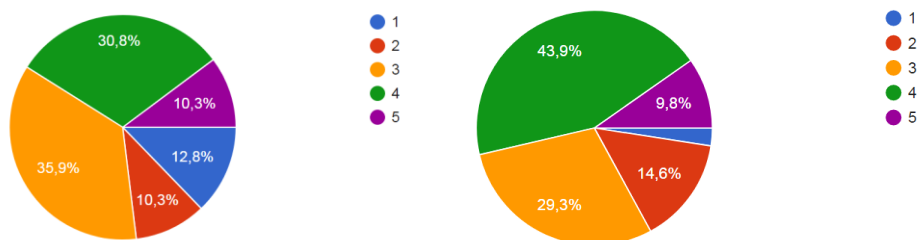

Fig. 1. *The results before the experiment in the experimental and control groups as for soft skills development.* (Source: Authors own contribution)

In order to develop certain skills successfully in the experimental group we offered the applying different kinds of educational games. The students of the control group were taught without applying educational games.

During the academic year at English lessons we implemented educational games, explaining to students what the soft skills are, what they consist of, what their key qualities are. Let's show our proposals. To develop the first skill as critical thinking we explained what it was.

Critical thinking is an important skill for a quality personal work. No doubt, life in the Internet age has surrounded us with a wealth of diverse. Therefore, it is vital to be able to question, separate truth from falsehood, filter, analyze information and draw one's own conclusions, since our actions are largely determined by the information we receive. Critical thinking skills do not only help a person to identify important information and sober ideas, but also to solve problems effectively.

To develop this skill, the following set of key personal qualities is necessary for a person: the ability to observe, reflect, interpret, analyze, draw conclusions, give assessments, and the ability to make decisions.

In order to develop critical thinking, psychologists advise to ask a large number of questions about a well known event, a literary work, famous data. This idea can be easily transformed into a "Who will ask more questions" team game, using learning material and practicing English as for vocabulary or grammar. On more advice is a case study.

The topics for case studies in our experiment were connected with law and investigation. They are the following: investigation of the of an MH17 air crash, a fire investigation at Notre Dame Cathedral, an investigation of Salisbury poisoning, an attack and capture of Ukrainian ships in the Black Sea etc. In addition, a discussion of a particular event in a game playing activity where students can act as observers (I have noticed…, if I were in his shoes I would…), and as participants-actors of the event, offering their final version, was applied in our experiment as well for this purpose.

For example, the case of the attack and capture of Ukrainian ships in the Black Sea in 2019. Let's imagine students' mock trail. They get a description of the case and divide the roles in the mock trial. At home they prepare their speech and the performance in the mock trial. Then students role-play the case. An English teacher evaluates the students. Then the teacher and students discuss and analyze the case.

The game activity also contributes to the development of **creativity**, a skill that is considered to be the most valuable in the automation and robotization era. Definitely, creativity should become a feature not only for people of creative professions, because of the ability to think outside the box, to imagine different solutions, to be inspired by new projects, not to be afraid of experiments, to use innovation, as it is the key to find fast and accurate solutions in other professions too. They say creativity helps a person to create useful things from nothing.

Speaking about the qualities which compose creativity, they may be the ability to formulate tasks clearly; look at the problem from the other side; expand the view destroying mental blockades; as well as speed up the process of finding solutions and increase their number.

All well-known techniques for the development of creativity are based on solving the following problems: formulating the problem clearly, collecting the initial data, developing criteria for structuring the initial data, structuring and studying comprehensively the source data, expanding the problem area, lifting mental blockades, formulating several points of view on

the situation, inventing the maximum solutions number, accelerating the process of creating ideas, developing criteria for selecting promising ideas or solutions, selecting truly beneficial and original solutions to the problem.

To develop creativity in our experiment we applied brainstorming to the case studies offered, where the students invented as many possible solutions as they could, including even fantastic ones, then chose the best of the expressed ideas. In addition we used the technique of "six caps" (De Bono, 1985) to some known problems, i.e. tried to look at the problem from several points of view: analytical, emotional, critical, optimistic, creative, and thinking in the long term.

Another applied method was "Make the known thing or idea strange and the strange known". Usually the method consists of ten steps: problem analysis and problem definition, spontaneous problem solutions, new problem understanding, building direct analogies, building personal analogies, building symbolic analogies, again building direct analogies, analyzing direct analogies, transferring analogies to the problem and developing approaches to its solving. Mind Mapping was also widely used. It was done on the basis of curriculum. Many other game activities were used like "What can be put in a three-liter jar" or "20 uses of a thing".

Such game activities can be used to help students break away from complex tasks and to relax, as well they contribute to develop communicative skills, English non-vocational vocabulary, some grammar that is often neglected in teaching English.

However, good pair or teamwork requires not only the skill of successful interaction with people, but also competent **team management**, i.e. the ability to form a team that will be determined, responsible for achieving common results. In order to acquire a team management skill, a person should develop two types of skills.

They are leadership skills such as self-organization, agility, project management skills, cultural intelligence, attention to people, trust and collaboration with a team, selflessness, responsiveness, patience, tact, authenticity, generosity; and time management skills, in other words, feel time that allows a person to set goals and priorities, start projects on time, make smart planning, make responsible decisions, focus on the important case, distribute tasks in a timely manner and deal with stressful situations.

No doubt, team games, both traditional and with help of gadgets, are able to develop team management skills. What is more, our experience has shown that time management skills are better developed through computer games while leadership skills are honed through team games. And besides, it is important for each student to try both as a team leader and as a team

member, to feel the difference and responsibility in a case when the team loses or wins.

Emotional intelligence is one of soft skills we have developed at English lessons. There is an opinion that developed emotional intelligence makes a person more successful (Goleman, 1996). The key qualities of emotional intelligence are a person's ability to recognize other people's emotions, intentions, understand their motivation and desires, as well as the ability to understand and control his own emotions.

Another important quality is the ability to control other people's emotions in order to solve one's own practical tasks. In order to develop all these abilities a person should be observant, analyze own and other people's emotions, be empathic. Thus, on the one hand, emotional intelligence allows a person to manage his emotions, and on the other hand, to recognize others, moreover, to use empathy to achieve his own goals.

In the context of teamwork and continuous globalization, **people interaction** is one of the important skills. It helps a person find a common language quickly to start a new project or resolve a conflict. The developed skill of people interaction also promotes rapid adaptation in a new team. However, people interaction is also one of the most multifaceted skills. So, interaction involves many aspects: first of all, it is the ability to engage in a dialogue, i.e. to hear, listen and agree, and to be responsible for the common cause and its outcome.

As for the key qualities that compose people interaction are communication skills, namely: being able to express personal thoughts clearly, self-confidence, respect for an interlocutor, friendliness, sincerity and constructiveness in relationships; and personal qualities as well such as positivity, tolerance, patience, diplomacy, humour, compassion, willingness to help, and others.

In our point of view, these qualities can be developed with the help of both role-playing games, in which the result is possible only with all players' interaction, and team games, where it is important to feel oneself as a part of the whole, to consider the opportunities of other team members and to do everything possible for a team to win. In our case, the role-playing games at topic Law were "At the Court Hearing", "Investigator at a Crime Scene", "Purchase and Sale at a Notary Office" and others.

The skill **conflict management** is very necessary in the most cases in real and professional life. As psychologists say, it is natural for a person and people's nature to disagree, and it is very important to show a person's disagreements in the correct way, to approach it correctly. No doubt, bad communication can quickly cause disagreements or worse. It is important

for students and University teachers to develop the skill to manage different conflicts. Clear, empathetic, patient communication leads to necessary outcomes and keeps personal and professional relationships strong. It is considered the skill refers basically to the emotions.

Firstly, it is important to be able to manage the emotions and states in conflicts: to understand what kind of emotion you feel and choose the correct reaction to it. Secondly, in a conflict it is important to observe an assertive behavior, i.e. the behavior that helps to support confidently one's own interests. The conflict management skill also includes the ability to negotiate competently, lead to the preferred win-to-win result.

At English lessons during the discussion in a role-playing game we taught students to use open questions stimulating cognitive process: «What would you do?»; «How can you solve this problem?», «And what happened next?», «What do you think about it.?», «Why do you think so?». To prevent conflicts we taught students to use different clichés: "I completely (absolutely, totally) agree with you", "Well, I agree with you on the whole, but…", "I'm afraid I don't see it this way", "Sorry for the interruption, but…".

During the discussion, it is necessary to focus students' attention to some active listening technologies and offer them such techniques as a pause, clarification, paraphrase, echo etc.

Another useful skill among soft skills today is **flexible consciousness**. It helps a person to adapt easily to new circumstances and not get lost in the face of uncertainty or changing circumstances. Moreover, people with flexible consciousness are more focused on personal growth. Instead of being afraid to make mistakes, they are evolving. They make efforts, learn, and overcome complexity. Therefore, flexible consciousness is a productive and useful personal quality.

In order to have flexible consciousness a person should possess the following skills: on the one hand, the ability to adapt, get out using creative abilities; on the other hand, the ability to go beyond patterns of thinking and behaviour, to think outside the box, i.e. the ability to abandon his own old views on something and the adoption of new, correct, profitable, relevant views.

Because psychologists advise to develop flexible consciousness through the development of projects to move toward a specific goal, in our classes the students created projects on a variety of curriculum topics. Among them there were the following topics: "How to find a good job", "How to earn more money", "How to mare learning a new foreign language easier" and more.

The soft skill we have chosen to develop through English games as well has been identified as **stress resistance**. It is well known that a person in a stress may suffer from memory and concentration impairment, feel tired, and become unsure and distrustful. Undoubtedly, all of the above does not contribute to the quality of professional tasks. So, it is vital to develop stress resistance, i.e. the ability to respond calmly to conflicting or ambiguous situations, overcome the emotional factor and act according to the logic.

Any educational game, on the one hand, helps to feel more relaxed, because it creates a good psychological atmosphere in the classroom, and on the other hand, a game teaches to manage emotions and be stress resistant, as it requires complex emotional and mental reactions. In this case, we used traditional games and computer games, as well as team games.

Moreover, at the present stage of development of innovative technologies, it is impossible to ignore the use of cloud technologies. We can offer to use the sites for playing education games. Different sites such as *LearningApps.org, JigZone*, or *Photograph Puzzle* or *Zondle* allow English teachers to create games as crosswords, puzzles, quizzes etc.
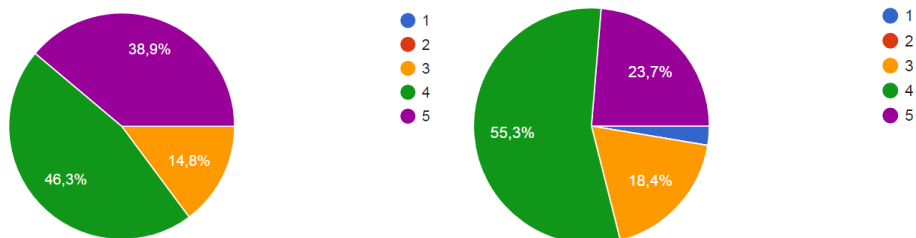
The interactive game "Gravity" in *Quizlet* site offers several levels of difficulty. We created a lot of vocabulary flashcards. Our students were divided into two teams and had to match as soon as possible the lexical units with their definitions or translations. The game had a time limit. The levels of difficulty depend on 'meteorites' or flashcards falling speed. It learns and helps students to be stress resistance.

So, after the experimental research we compare students' results again. The data about students' soft skills development after the experiment in the experimental and control groups are not equal. The dynamics is revealed in the experimental group (figure 2).
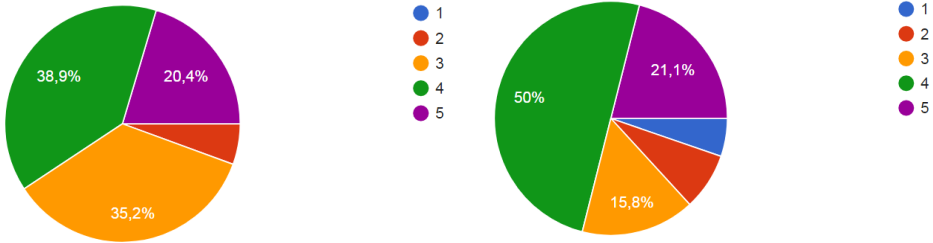
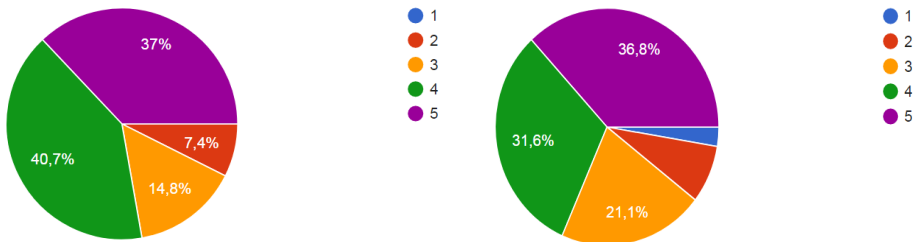**Experimental Group**   **Control Group**

1. How do you evaluate your skill to think critically: to filter what you hear, to doubt different thoughts, to analyze, to come to your own conclusions?
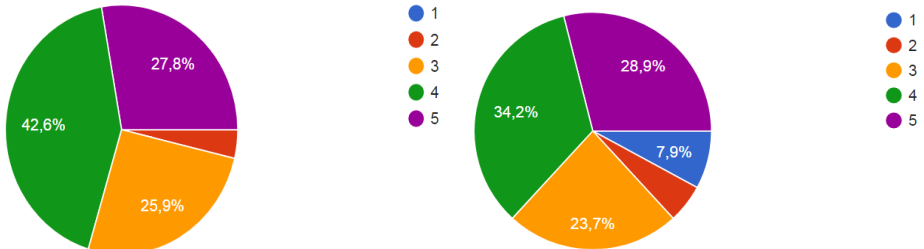
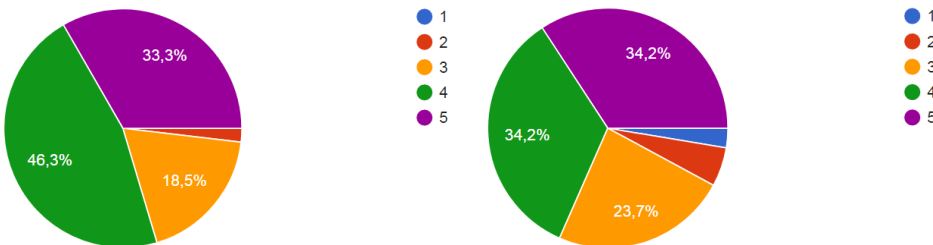2. How creative are you, can you create something quickly?

3. Can you manage a team of like-minded people, build good relationships with the team?
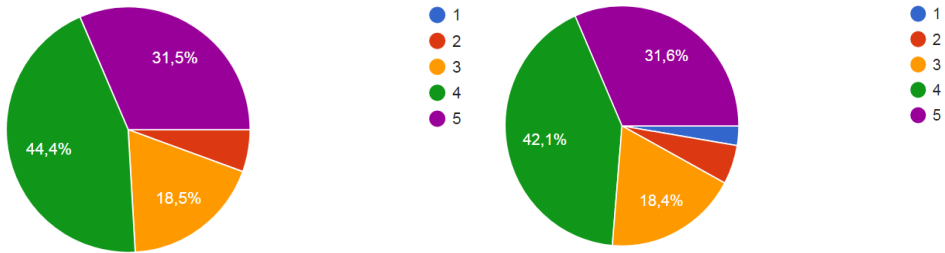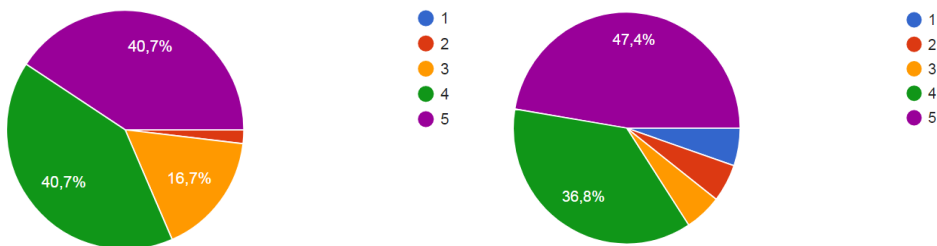

4. Can you manage your emotions?

5. How well do you interact with different people?

6. Can you find a way out of a conflict?

7. Are you focused on overcoming various challenges?

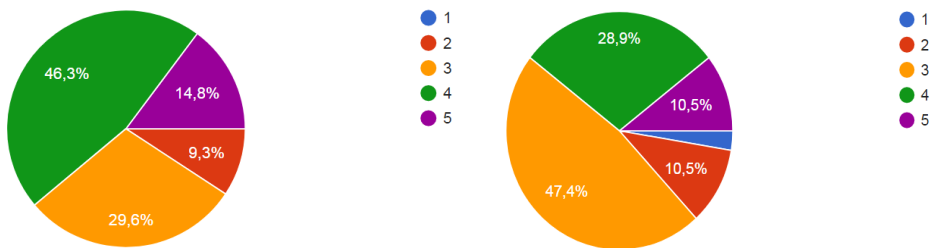8. How stressful are you: do your attention, concentration, and memory suffer during a stress?

Fig. 2. *The results after the experiment in the experimental and control groups as for soft skills development.* (Source: Authors own contribution)

So, the results approved that role-playing games do improve students' soft skills development in English classroom only in the experimental group where the games were used. Definitely, in the experimental group the growth is different in every soft skill development.

Our research data can be explained by the fact that despite we tried to pay equal attention to all soft skills, some of them are influences more, some ones less. In the experimental group, to our mind, critical thinking (the progress in the experimental group of the highest range when the skill is quite well developed is 15%), emotional intelligence (12%), people interaction (5%), stress resistance (4%) appeared to be the most frequent activities applied not only at English lessons, but they are influenced

regularly as a part of students' usual class work and homework; in learning at universities, and in everyday life as well.

On the contrary, in the experimental group, creativity, team management, conflict management (almost no progress) are trained unfortunately not so often outside the class; moreover, it can be connected to the individual participation in group and pair work at English lessons.

And, definitely, the surprise for us is, in the experimental group, the negative growth of flexible consciousness (-12%). It can be explained that the first-year students at the beginning of the experiment were ready to adapt learning at university, studying English hard, and at the end of the first year, it appears, they were a bit frustrated of the university demands, new learning conditions (not the same as in schools), psychological problems, adaptation issues.

Limits and discussion

Different authors propose various ways at English lessons to develop soft skills. We definitely agree with some scientists' views (Tsalikova & Pakhotina, 2019) as they believe "an academic role-playing game was chosen as a means of forming soft skills in the process of mastering Foreign Language as an academic discipline" and they compare the development of such skills as collaboration, communication, critical thinking at English lessons. E. Tevdovska offers some other ways of integrating soft skills in English classroom. They are "task based and problem-solving activities", "group work involving discussions and debates", "role plays and dialogues" etc (Tevdovska, 2015). However, our paper shows mainly the development of another eight soft skills in terms of offered game activities.

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University (Kharkiv, Ukraine) and H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University (Kharkiv, Ukraine), which are based on the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments. All participants have given consent for their data to be used in this research.

So, we believe that our research results are interesting for international educators, researchers, managers. As it is known, higher education should correspond the demands and needs of the modern world changing rapidly. The researchers from Harvard University, the Carnegie Foundation and Stanford Research Center have found that soft skills are 85% of a person's success in a job, profession, and career. Moreover, in 2017, Google conducted internal research to identify the most productive company teams. The researchers found that their best teams were mixed

groups with strong soft skills. The survey conducted by recruitment agency Robert Half showed that more than a half of HR directors pay more and more attention to an employees' soft skills, not only professional competencies.

Strange as it may seem a diploma importance is decreasing gradually, it is being replaced by the interest to an employee's personality and his soft skills development. That is why it is important for international education, research, management our data, experience, ways proposed for soft skills development.

Conclusions

So, the paper proves experimentally the effectiveness of game-based teaching in English classes with university students for soft skills development. Eight basic soft skills were analyzed, they were critical thinking, creativity, team management, emotional intelligence, people interaction, conflict management, flexible consciousness and stress resistance. Different game activities to develop soft skills were shown at English lessons. The questionnaire was done before and after the experiment as a mean to check students' data and the growth of soft skills development. It has definitely shown the influence of game activities to soft skills development.

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