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The Challenges of Soft Skills Training in the Age of Artificial Intelligence.

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Abstract

Over the last decade, Soft Skills have gained momentum in the academic sphere due to its high role in bridging the gap between the graduates' competencies and the demands of the marketplace. Hence, it is important for the learning environment to be a place that promotes the necessary skills and competencies among students to meet the demands of the job market. However, the teaching of soft skills has always been a challenging endeavour for teachers, precisely when it comes to the teaching methods, classroom activities, and the fulfilment of learner needs. Traditional methods of teaching soft skills have displayed a number of drawbacks particularly in terms of authenticity of classroom material and efficacy of the teaching method. Yet, in the current technological revolution coming with the introduction of Artificial Intelligence (IA) various and unique solutions have been presented by the AI, particularly about pedagogy, mode of inclusion, and the authenticity of classroom material. Hence, it becomes essential to explore how AI is revolutionising Soft Skills training by examining its integration in the teaching and learning practices, especially that Soft Skills are more subjective and require more personalised teaching approaches. The present research examines the integration of AI in the teaching and learning of soft skills through ESP courses, namely Business English and English for Computing. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach to data collection, using questionnaires and classroom observation. The study concludes that AI not only revolutionises the traditional methods but it transcends them making soft skills learning more practical and more powerful than before through authentic and interactive scenarios generated by AI. It provides personalized and interactive activities, depending on the needs of learners which allows rapid and effective skills development and mastery. Most students reported positive experiences with these AI platforms focussing on the added value of AI with regard to the learning and mastery of different soft skills. The study reveals important progress in students' engagement and performance through AI generated course material and classroom activities. AI powered platforms show their ability to revolutionize the teaching and learning practices of soft skills. AI has succeeded to a considerable extent to compensate the defects of traditional methods, particularly in its ability to generate personalized course content and classroom activities which effectively and efficiently respond to learners needs. Moreover, characteristics such as personalization, authenticity, instant feedback and the ability to meet learners needs, have qualified the use of AI powered platforms in soft skills training to be a promising approach in the academic sphere.

Key Words: Soft Skills, ESP Courses, Artificial Intelligence, Pedagogy, Higher Education, Learner needs.

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1. Introduction

In today`s world, particularly with the rapid expansion of science and technology, the dissemination of information is getting more and more extensive around the globe requiring the use of a global language to make this exchange happens. Hence, the significance of the English language appears to be primordial in making these exchanges of various forms happen. English language as an international language has gained momentum over the last two decades and paves the way for more commercial exchanges around the globe. Thus, English language stands as a common medium of communication among the international community. Given the significance of the English Language, Morocco has started to give much more importance to English language teaching and learning. Therefore, English is gradually occupying a major position in subject education in Moroccan higher education.

Examining the make-up of the Moroccan educational system, one can easily notice that most of the programs are theory-based and teacher-centered where the focus is primarily on the instructor. Learners receive big amount of impractical information which most of the time does not help them grow academically and personally. Besides, there is a big gap between what students learn at school and the requirements of the job market. However, starting from the last educational reform which took place on 2004, the ministry of education in Morocco has focussed the efforts on the learners in an attempt to make them active agents in the learning operation. The last educational reform has sought to reduce the amount of impractical information and replace it with a set of skills which are designed to meet students` career-related needs. The last reform has focussed also on the correlation between what students learn in class and success in their future professions. Thus, the ministry has started renovating most higher education programs and bring them in line with the demands of the market. In this respect, English departments have sought to incorporate a range of soft skills through various ESP courses which provide key communicative skills that are most useful for graduate students in their future professions along with other skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, time management, conflict resolution, and collaboration that are most wanted in the professional milieu.

English departments provide the opportunity of teaching specialised English for various professional areas which go under the cover of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). With English becoming the tongue of this globalised world, ESP has quickly gained a major position in language studies in Morocco. The aim has been to prepare students for careers in all domains and improve the language skills of future employees through ESP courses, particularly that employers and stakeholders expect higher education to contribute in compensating the lack of skilled graduates and enhance the stock of the human capital with the necessary criteria of the job market.

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Therefore, the ministry of education has begun to attach big importance to English language teaching and soft skills courses given their valuable impetus. However, when it comes to teaching these skills various and unique challenges have been raised, particularly about pedagogy as soft skills training has always been a complex undertaking as the process of including soft skills in higher education is not always straightforward and often entails complex decisions regarding the skills to be included, the mode of inclusion and most importantly the way of teaching them. Yet, in the current technological revolution coming with the introduction of Artificial Intelligence (IA) these challenges appear to be manageable, particularly in terms of inclusion and the mode of teaching. The last technological revolution characterised by AI potential has provided practical solutions which ease the teaching of soft skills in the best way possible.

Thus, the aim of the present study is to examine the integration of AI in the teaching and learning of soft skills through ESP courses, namely Business English and English for Computing. The study also seeks to evaluate the practicality and effectiveness of using AI in the teaching of soft skills through two ESP courses. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach to data collection, using questionnaires and classroom observation.

From a quantitative perspective, the study longs to evaluate the perceptions and views of learners on the effectiveness of AI in the learning process of soft skills. The use of qualitative method, on the other hand is meant to examine learners' interaction with AI platforms, the learning activities generated by AI, and the extent to which these activities meet the underlined objectives of the course. In this respect, the present research project longs to make two major contributions. First, the findings of the study are conceived to add to the understanding of ESP courses and their capacity to equip students with the necessary skills of the workplace through the use of this revolutionary technology, namely AI and its potential to revolutionise soft skills training. Second, the study offers a working framework of how to teach various skills through virtual job simulations, role plays, and various real-life scenarios inspired from real workplace situations. In brief, the study explores how AI transforms previous teaching and learning challenges into an enjoyable and effective experience.

The significance of the study reflects the Moroccan ambition to reform its educational sector through the integration of soft skills, ICT and other revolutionary components in higher education programs given their significance in the economic and social sectors. This ambition was well pronounced in the last educational charter through the first section which says "the educational and training sector is given top national priority after territorial integrity" (clause 21). The charter also states that incorporating soft skills into education was among the prime recommendations to improve this same reform program. The importance of the current study is also reflected through

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providing a well-established framework on the use of AI in the teaching and learning practices of soft skills highlighting the revolutionary potential of this technology.

2. Literature Review

2.1.Moroccan Higher Education Programs and Soft Skills Integration

For long the Moroccan educational objectives have been obscure and most of the time do not reflect the real career-related needs of the learners. However, the last development on the international scale over the last two decades have dictated a completely different objectives on educational programs which require the design of new curricula and new methods of teaching which would shape the demands and needs of employment within the so-called information society. To meet these new goals, educational institutions around the world have come to the conclusion that educational programs should offer the convenient curricula to prepare students to be successful employees in the workplace environment and proactive citizens who can participate in the development of the country. In the Moroccan context, when contemplating our educational programs, we find out that the educational strategy relies mostly on stuffing information into students` minds and then regorge these information chunks into the exam sheets. This operation lasts for long until the last decade when stakeholders have started to realise that there is a big divergence between what educational programs offer and what the work place expect. This situation has pushed educational policymakers and curriculum designers to revise the course content and the teaching methods and refine them to meet the demands of the information society which characterise modern time.

Within the course of this revision, stakeholders understand the gap between learners' competences and the expectations of the market. Therefore, the course of amendments focuses on balancing the components of the course content between the theoretical part and the practical part which banks on providing learners with various skills and the technical knowledge which would allow them to be effective employees and active citizens in the society. Thus, the significance of the so called `soft skills` in the Moroccan higher education context is getting momentum and various attempts of integrating these skills into higher education agenda have already started to produce future employees and experts with marketable skills and competencies that would meet the demands of the professional milieu.

Since the last amendments of the past higher education reform which took place on 2004 many educational institutions across the country have started refining their programs to bring them in line with the actual needs of employment and the world market in general. The reform recognises the correlation between what students learn in class and success in their future careers. Hence, the objective has been to equip learners with the necessary skills and the know-how to make them active and proactive employees of the society. In the literature, employability skills are defined

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differently and from various perspectives. Competence-based approaches, for instance, define employability skills as "having set of skills, knowledge and personal attitudes that make the person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful" (Dacre and Sewell. 2007. P 6). On the other hand, York (2006), considers the individual's employability as "a set of achievements, skills, understandings, and personal attributes, that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community, and the economy". (p. 8). The above definitions focus on the key components of this set of skills that students should learn in class in order to meet to requirement of employment on a large scale.

These skills, despite the labels that they may take, are proved to be an essential addition in the preparation of students to flourish in the workplace. These skills allow students to improve their potential and performance in the professional milieu. When putting these skills into practice, students become more capable to avoid and reduce errors, they encourage collaboration among colleagues and partners, and more importantly, they exercise their roles effectively and efficiently. From a different perspective, Hillage and Pollard (1998) define employability skills in terms of three abilities including: "gaining employment, maintaining employment, obtaining new employment". This indicates that integrating the professional milieu requires a strategic disposition to shape those three basic steps of employment. According to Hillard and Pollard (1998) employability skills are groups of skills which extend sometimes to include subgroups of two main classes: the first category is known as generic skills or discipline specific skills. These are fundamental skills which ensure successful performance in the workplace. Instances of this set of skills include, imagination, coordination, planning, problem resolution... etc. the second category of skills is called career management skills which is organised into two subgroups: self-management and career building (P. 6). According to Hillage and Pollard, this set is meant to provide the learners with the necessary professional aptitudes to be able to maintain and flourish in their professional roles.

The above definitions show the importance of employability skills in the process of obtaining and maintaining a job. These skills are proved to be the green card for today`s world market. They constitute an integral part of the candidate`s profile. Besides the subject degree, employers consider these skills as the main criteria for the job selection. These non-technical skills that define how people interact with others and build relationships, are applicable to all workplaces and relate to skills such as public speaking, leadership, teamwork and problem solving. Other soft skills include emotional intelligence, a positive attitude and taking the initiative which allow the employee to be a dynamic member with the capacity to impact the future career outcomes and success of the enterprise.

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Being aware of the importance of these soft skills, higher education institutions around the globe have tried to incorporate these skills into higher education curricula through various courses and teaching strategies. In this regard, Yorke (2006) explains the case as follows, "The employability of graduates has an aim that governments around the world have, to varying extents, imposed on national higher education systems." (p. 3). Governments around the world have become fully convinced with the value of these skills in the preparation of graduates to be highly operational in their societies. Yorke (2006) continues to explain that the movements of including employability in higher education programs stem from the human capital theory (Becker, 1975, in Yorke, 2006), which argues that the job of governments is to provide the conditions which increase the productive and creative potential and improve the skills of the potential employees.

In his reviews, Robles (2012) explains that "companies rate their employees interpersonal and self-management skills as more important than their analytical abilities" (p. 461). Governments and stakeholders have become fully persuaded that soft-skills constitute a major criterion in the potential candidate's profile. Therefore, Robes (2012) summarises his analysis by stating that "Even in quantitative areas, educators must instil the importance and development of soft skills in addition to specific discipline foundation. Surprisingly, most of one`s education is time spent on technical skills, but integration of soft skills with technical skills is critical." (p. 462). Similarly, Williams (2015) stresses the fact that "It is the college's responsibility to identify and implement the appropriate soft skills training approach to help students with this transition", and by the transition he means the passage from school to the professional milieu. He continues to explain that a lot of employers state that these qualities are competing for academic or technical skills providing the ability to predict employment and earnings, among other outcomes (p. 3). It appears from the above quotations of both scholars that the integration of soft skills in educational programs has become a national need in order to meet the requirements of today`s information age and global economy. Hence, it is important to consider the added value of these skills in the preparation of successful candidates as they become equipped with the employability capital knowledge which would help them accomplish better achievements in the working environment.

2.2. Soft Skills Integration in Higher Education Programs

In the midst of the above discussion, the question which remains important is how to incorporate these skills in higher education curricula? What are the most practical strategies and teaching methods which ensure a successful integration and delivery of these skills in higher education curricula? In literature, answers to these questions suggest various modes of integration. Robes (2012), for instance, suggests the following steps with regard to the inclusion of employability skills in the curriculum:

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- Introducing students to people skills.
- Teaching essential customer service skills.
- Foster student understanding by facilitating a problem solving discussion based on real-life situations.
- Have students demonstrate the people skills they have in mock professional setting and role-play exercises. (p. 13)

Robes introduces his mode of inclusion focussing on some key components like customer service, problem solving that would be taught through discussions based on real life situations and role play exercises in professional settings. Such activities bring students into authentic situations in which they are required to put into practice the skills they have learned in class.

On the other hand, McFarlane (2005) suggests that soft skills could be integrated in higher education programs through various activities which can be either inserted in the curriculum or be organized as workshops and seminars. He puts the case as follows:

Apart from integrating employability skills in the curriculum, the key skills are developed through discrete modules, such as Personnel Management Workshop, which offers students a simulation of the entire recruitment process, including analysing advertised positions, short listing and interviewing. Careers Module, which is universal for the entire student population, aims to enable students to define career objectives and plans, to engage with the recruitment processes and to develop the ability to control their future careers (p. 279).

McFarlane in the above quotation believes that soft skills are better taught in the form of separate workshops and seminars based on simulations of the entire process of recruitment. These workshops aim to equip students and enable them to be familiar with career objectives and be able to control their future career with high level of professionalism. This mode of teaching soft skills, McFarlane notes, has been tried on the first time at Staffordshire University and the institutional strategies for enhancing student employability in UK and the results were satisfying to the point that scholars recommend the experiment to other institutions. McFarlane also points out that this career module is universal and meant for the whole student population.

The other mode of teaching soft skills relies on the use of foreign languages, particularly English language; therefore, program-specific language courses has been developed to answer the demands of national and global market. Despite the fact that this mode is the last to be suggested, yet through various academic attempts ESP has proved to be a practical means to teach soft skills in higher education level. Hence, ESP has attracted the attention of the employment sector in the higher education sphere around the globe. Likewise, higher education institutions have received lately growing pressures from employment parties to produce graduates with employability skills who can meet the requirements of today`s employment.

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The relationship between ESP courses and employability skills steams from the capacity of this branch of English language to deliver these skills depending on two key features of ESP, namely specificity (language skills) and authenticity (realistic exposure to the language) which go in parallel. Furthermore, being designed for graduate students (adult learners), this academic and vocational English has a direct contact with potential employees which gives ESP more credits as the most convenient language course that answer to the demands of employment in terms of skills and communication.

Since the beginning, ESP course designers have realised the correlation between what students should learn in class and success in their future professions. Therefore, the main goal of higher education programs and English department has been to ensure that ESP courses deliver key skills which are most useful to graduate in their future careers.

In literature, English for specific purposes (ESP) refers to "the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language where the goal of the learners is to use English in a particular domain". (Paltridge & Starfield 2013:2). In the same respect, Johns (2013) explains that "Unlike many other research areas in theoretical and applied linguistics, ESP has been, at its core, a practitioners' movement, devoted to establishing, through careful research, the needs and relevant discourse features for a targeted group of students" (p. 6). The most important feature of ESP courses is learners` needs on which course designers rely to develop the course content. Being based on learner` needs analysis, ESP courses have proved to follow a new philosophy of teaching which align with the expectations of employment. Needs analysis remains a distinctive feature of ESP courses which makes it the most convenient program that cater for the demands of the market in terms of life skills and subject knowledge.

Yet, when it comes to teaching soft skills, various challenges come to the fore as soft skills teaching has always been a complex undertaking as the process of including soft skills in higher education is not always straightforward and often entails complex decisions regarding the skills to be included, the mode of inclusion and most importantly the way of teaching them. Hitherto, in the current technological revolution coming with the introduction of Artificial Intelligence (IA) these challenges appear to be manageable, particularly in terms of inclusion and the mode of teaching. The last technological revolution characterised by AI has provided practical solutions which ease the teaching of soft skills in the best way possible.

As mentioned earlier, soft skills include personal attributes that facilitate effective and harmonious interactions with others. These skills include: communication skills, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, critical thinking and emotional intelligence. These skills remain central for the workforce environment as they complement technical skills, allowing employees to collaborate,

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innovate, and drive organizational success. Thus, soft skills become increasingly important for fostering a supportive environment and maintaining a competitive edge.

2.3. The use of AI in Soft Skills Methodology

The last wave of technological development characterised by the introduction of Artificial Intelligence (AI), which makes use of advanced technologies like machine learning algorithms and natural language processing, has allowed AI to shape learning experiences to individual preferences enhancing the effectiveness and engagement of the training. The potential of AI offers the opportunity to adapt the training program to different learning styles in real time providing continuous feedback to help learners adjust their skills. Due to its revolutionary potential, AI, in a very short time, has proved its ability to create realistic scenarios for each skill. For instance, through language processing tool, AI can simulate real life conversations enhancing interpersonal skills and offering learners the opportunity to practice active listening, empathy, and emotional intelligence in a safe environment. Moreover, AI-generated simulations replicate real-world challenges, allowing learners to put into play their skills in professional work-related contexts.

With regard to the teaching methods of soft skills, AI has succeeded to a great extent to enhance traditional soft skills training methods by integrating interactive and authentic learning experiences. In this respect, Benjamin Poucin (2024) explained that AI-powered platforms offer features like instant feedback, performance analysis, and real-time question-answering, making the learning process more dynamic and engaging. Thus, AI potential could fill in the gaps of traditional methods by providing effective solutions for both practitioners and learners.

In the literature, Various AI tools have appeared to facilitate effective training programs, reflecting the growing importance of soft and hard skills in the workplace environment. These tools help artificial intelligence to create practical and personalized learning experiences pertinent to the body of soft skills. They help learners develop soft skills such as communication, problem-solving, teamwork, and emotional intelligence in the most effective way possible. Furthermore, these AI programs emphasize how soft skills enable learners to build a strong foundation of soft skills.

The set of these AI tools which are conceptualised for soft skills training are presented in the below table:

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AI Tool	Best For	Key Features
Disco	All-in-one AI upskilling platform	Automates content creation, quick launch of branded training programs, social learning, AI-powered automation, robust analytics, customizable interface
VirtualSpeech	Soft skills training in VR/AR	AI-powered VR training, diverse training modules, instant feedback, flexible learning options, self-paced learning
360Learning	AI collaborative platform	AI-powered question generator, collaborative learning environment, real-time peer feedback, personalized training recommendations, scalable solutions
Rehearsal	Video-based practice approach	Video-based practice, AI-powered feedback, role-playing exercises, skill development focus, continuous improvement
Practera	Experiential soft skills training	Experiential learning modules, real-time feedback from mentors, scalable solutions, tailored learning paths, collaborative learning environment
LMS Didask	Easy creation of personalized content	With Didask LMS you can import your existing content (slides, PDF, Word documents) and let the AI do the rest. The AI analyzes these documents, proposes an adapted pedagogical division and creates modules and granules accordingly.

Table 1: AI powered platforms for soft skills development

https://www.disco.co/blog/ai-tools-for-soft-skills-training. December 17, 2024

Disco, this All-in-one AI upskilling platform, allows practitioners to create effective soft skills programs for their learners and enable them to quickly introduce branded training programs. Hence, the platform is considered as:

one of the best AI tools for soft skills development is that it has robust functionality, from being a generative AI tool to an AI community assistant. Disco AI works well across the Disco platform. It generates an entire training program in seconds, including texts, images, video assets, quizzes, and assignments. (https://www.disco.co/blog/ai-tools-for-soft-skills-training).

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Besides the above mentioned features, Disco platform also gives the opportunity for practitioners to generate discussion posts, answer learners questions instantly and suggests prompts to improve learners participation in classroom debates and discussions.

Virtual Speech, on the other hand, is an AI powered platform designed for public speaking and leadership skills. It provides learners with a variety of roleplays and practice activities intended to enhance communication skills.

360Learning is an AI collaborative platform designed mainly for particular skills, namely teamwork, communication, and emotional intelligence. More importantly, this AI tool has the capacity to tailor content for specific needs of learners.

Rehearsal is also an innovative platform powered by AI for soft skills training. The platform is based on a video approach which incorporates AI features that provides learners with personalized material and feedback on presentation and communication skills allowing students to improve their skills effectively. Besides, Rehearsal focusses on refining critical skills like time management, conflict resolution, and public speaking. Coupled with comprehensive feedback instruments and roleplay activities, Rehearsal remains essential to foster the necessary skills for workplace environment.

Practera is the last AI platform in the list of AI powered tools designed for soft skills purposes. Practera is considered by various practitioners as the best for experiential soft skills training. The latter platform is equipped with AI instruments which enhance soft skills through experiential and project-based learning. Practera is based mainly on authentic scenarios which provide learners with practical experience intended to bridge the gap between learning the demands of the professional milieu.

LMS (Learning Management Systems) Didask, on the other hand, is an AI powered platform which congregates almost all AI features in one. The latter platform is characterised by its `easy to use` features, designed for all types of practitioners with little or advanced knowledge in computing and technology. In this respect, the designer of Didask Benjamin Poucin (2024) notes: Imagine learning paths where each scenario is perfectly adapted to each employee, where feedback is instant and relevant, and where engagement is maintained through advanced personalization techniques. AI isn't just replacing old methods; it transcends them, making soft skills training more practical and more powerful than ever. (https://www.didask.com/en/post/comment-lintelligence-artificielle-transforme-la-formation-aux-soft-skills)

The above quote summarises the big potential of AI tools and platforms with regard to soft skills training. In brief, AI has brought revolutionary qualities to soft skills training like never before. If traditional methods of teaching and learning soft skills offered some solutions with little efficacy to deal with soft skills, AI is speeding up, simplifying and above all considerably improving the

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teaching and learning processes and their results through practical features such as concrete experimentation, active practice, authentic scenarios and simulations, tangible roleplays, and instant/constructive feedback. Soft skills remain critical for the success of individuals and organisations accordingly it is important to equip practitioners and learners alike with the necessary procedures and tools to make soft skills training an enjoyable and effective endeavour. The subsequent section would show the extent to which AI tools and platforms have succeeded to enhance the teaching and learning of soft skills through the present research project.

3. Methodology

The vision of the present study is based on two elements: the significance of employability skills for the workplace and the opportunities offered by Artificial Intelligence platforms to teach these set of skills in the best way possible. By way of definition, this is an exploratory study that aims at examining the views and perspectives of learners about the use of AI in the teaching and learning of soft skills as it assesses the practicality and efficacy of AI generated course material and classroom activities in the learning operation.

In this respect, Creswell (2003) explains that exploratory studies are most valuable when “not much has been written about the topic or the population being studied” (p. 30) which is the case of the present study.

So far as the research practice is concerned, both quantitative and qualitative methods are used in the present study known in the literature of research by different names such as multi-methods (Brannen, 1992), multi-strategy (Bryman, 2004), mixed methods (Creswell, 2003), or mixed methodology research (Tashakkori &Taddlie, 1998). Besides, the exploratory nature of the study which entails a mixed methodology, Creswell et al. (2003) argue that multi-strategy research can be helpful to researchers and writers in clarifying the nature of their intentions or their accomplishments.

Also, combining both methods allow the researcher to bring together a more comprehensive account of this area of inquiry; namely, the effectiveness of AI integration in the teaching and learning operation of soft skills and its added value in terms of course content and classroom activities. In terms of structure, employing mixed methodology strongly helps in deploying each to answer different research questions of the study. Furthermore, ‘context’ is given much importance in the present study; hence the combination of research methods is rationalized to provide contextualized understanding paired with generalizable valid findings or in times broad relationships among the existing variables.

The nature of the present research endeavour which makes use of both qualitative and quantitative methods lends itself to the epistemological framework of pragmatism which advocates the use of mixed methodology. In this respect, Tashakkori and Teddlie, (1998); Fishman, (1999) explain that

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Pragmatism theory addresses the considerations of both qualitative and quantitative researchers by proposing that all human inquiry entails interpretation, intentions, and values that are necessarily grounded on empirical, embodied experience. Similarly, Maxcy, (2003) notes that the "pragmatist does not inquire to seek a truth that is independent of human experience; but rather the aim of his inquiry is to achieve a better, richer experience through scientific analysis, artistic exploration, social negotiation, or any productive combination of these different approaches" (pp.51–87).

Hence, the questionnaire and classroom observation which are the two main research instruments, are designed to elicit the respondents` experiences, evaluations, attitudes, and perceptions towards the use of AI in the teaching and learning operation of soft skills and allow the researcher to observe students' interaction with AI platforms and course material to gain a profound understanding about the effectiveness and practicality of the AI-powered platforms in the improvement of different soft skills.

3.1. Research Questions

Given the importance of soft skills in today`s world, the impetus of the present study is, therefore, to answer questions related to such influential component of higher education programs particularly with the introduction of AI in education. I believe that the impact of AI in soft skills training has long-lasting effects on the development of learners' performance in the professional milieu. Hence, the formulated questions of this study are meant to scrutinize the effects of integrating AI in soft skills training through ESP courses along with an examination of the views of learners on the importance of integrating AI in soft skills pedagogy in higher education programs. The set of questions includes:

1. Why higher education institutions should integrate Soft Skills in their curricula?
2. To what extent the use of AI in Soft Skills pedagogy has eased the teaching and learning practices?
3. How effective was AI in dealing with the teaching and learning challenges of the traditional methods?
4. What are the attitudes of learners towards the use of AI in soft skills training?

3.2. Basic Assumptions

The present study is guided by an elemental premise based on the fact that employability skills have gained momentum over the years in the professional milieu to the extent that they have become a prerequisite for the recruitment process all over the world. Therefore, the present study upholds the significance of integrating soft skills in higher education programs to make students capable to meet the requirements of the global market. Yet, soft skills training has always been a complex undertaking particularly in terms of pedagogy. The process of including soft skills in higher education is not always straightforward and often entails complex decisions regarding the

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skills to be included and the mode of teaching them. However, in the current technological revolution coming with the introduction of Artificial Intelligence (IA) various challenges have been delt with successfully through the revolutionary potential of AI which provides effective solutions to soft skills training.

3.3. Data Collection Instruments

The present study is of a triangulation nature making use of both a questionnaire and classroom observation as two data collection instruments. The questionnaire is designed for learners who are enrolled in ESP courses, namely Business English, and English for Computing and includes items designed to elicit information about learners` experiences, expectations and feedback on learning soft skills through the use of course material generated by AI platforms. The questionnaire of the present study was directed to university students studying ESP courses and was piloted on a group of respondents made up of six students who study Business English, and English for Computing at Chouaib Doukkali University. These respondents are part of the target population and their responses were retained as guidelines to any further wording, order of questions, or the range of answers on multiple-choice questions.

The surveys were written in the English language and include multiple choice questions, rating questions, and Likert scale questions as each type serves a special purpose. Moreover, using various question types helps increase responses to the research questions and incite the respondents for more engagement with the topic. The response rate from the students was 98%.

On the other hand, classroom observation was applied to test the effectiveness and practicality of AI implementation in soft skills training, particularly in terms of pedagogy. Such data collection instrument allows the researcher to observe students` interaction with AI platforms and course material and evaluate the extent to which AI potential could help practitioners overcome the previous challenges of traditional methods of teaching soft skills. Through observing students' interaction and feedback, the researcher could get a profound and inclusive vision on how effective the newly applied methods are.

3.4. Population Sample

Given that the study assesses the potential of AI to overcome the challenges of soft skills training, particularly in terms of pedagogy, the population of the present study is made up of students enrolled in Business English and English for Computing at Chouaib Doukkali University. The target population for this study is composed of 309 graduating students with an age range which varies between 20 and 22 years old.

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4. Results and Discussion

Quantitative data was collected and analysed to identify learners` attitudes, perceptions and evaluations with regard to the effectiveness and practicality of course material generated by the AI in both courses: Business English and English for Computing. The collected data is studied and analysed through Excel software due to the relatively small number of respondents. So, to gain insights into these relationships and provide explanatory details, the aim of this section is to display, analyse and discuss the findings of the research study. The results should then help to answer questions relative to the impact of AI implementation in soft skills training.

As mentioned earlier in the methodology section, the 309 respondents who were targeted in the administration of the questionnaires were positively engaged with the survey questions. The response rate was (98 %), which is approvingly adequate for analysis. The descriptive statistics regarding the students` survey were counted and then converted to percentages. The same formula was applied to the analysis of the participants' responses to questionnaire items. A detailed profile of respondents of this category which includes age, gender, educational level and major is displayed in the following charts:

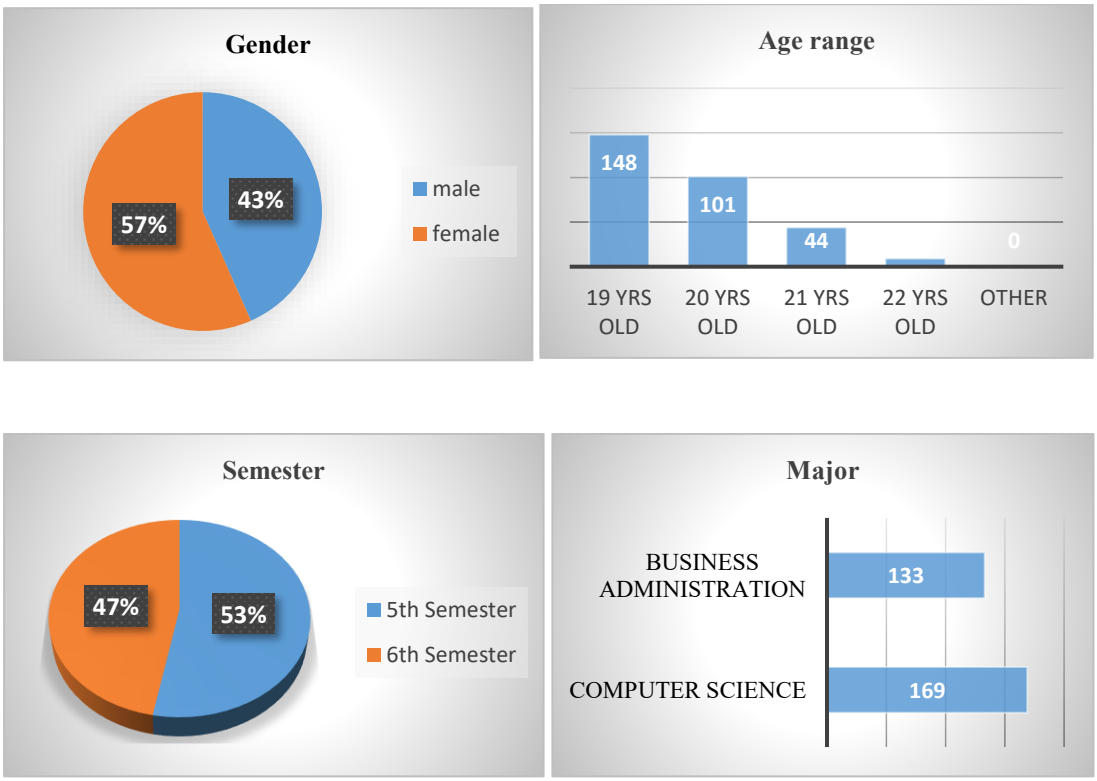

Figure 1: Participants Profiles

The above charts provide a general picture about the respondents' profiles which would ease the understanding and analysis of their engagement with the survey questions. The combination of the background features helps ensure that the responses reflect the actual experiences of respondents at different stages of the soft skills course.

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To address the research questions, the following survey items are selected among others for study and analysis. Based on the participants` responses and reactions towards AI generated course material, the results suggest that the students place greater importance on the AI generated course material being an extension of the widespread influence of AI technology over all facets of life. Hence, respondents were quite eager to find out how AI potential could revolutionize classroom material in terms of input and delivery.

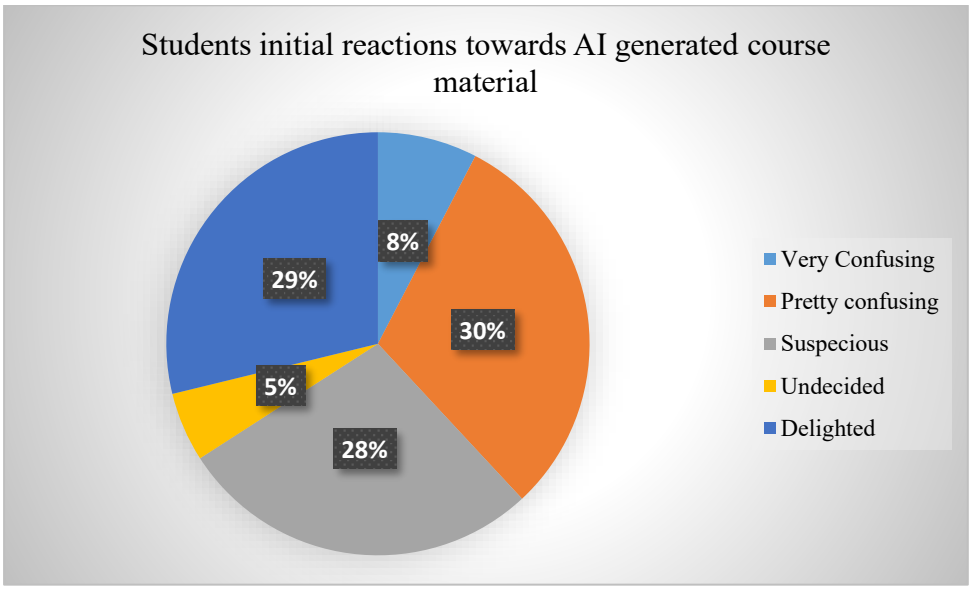

Figure 2: Students initial reactions towards AI generated course material

A reading through the above figure shows that a considerable percentage of students (30%) found that the combination of AI generated material with soft skills training was pretty confusing followed by (28%) of respondents who were suspicious about such combination due to the fact that such experience was a debut in the classroom environment. It took them sometime to understand how AI integration in academic courses has become a new venture saluted and promoted by academics and partitioners in various educational institutions around the world, particularly that AI has revolutionized all facets of life around us including education. Such confusion was obvious during the first three sessions, however as soon as they were fully engaged with the classroom activities through authentic roleplays and simulations, they soon came to understand how practical and effective the integration of AI in course content is. They found out that AI generated activities go beyond the theoretical level they were accustomed with previously, to authentic situations and scenarios similar to real work environment.

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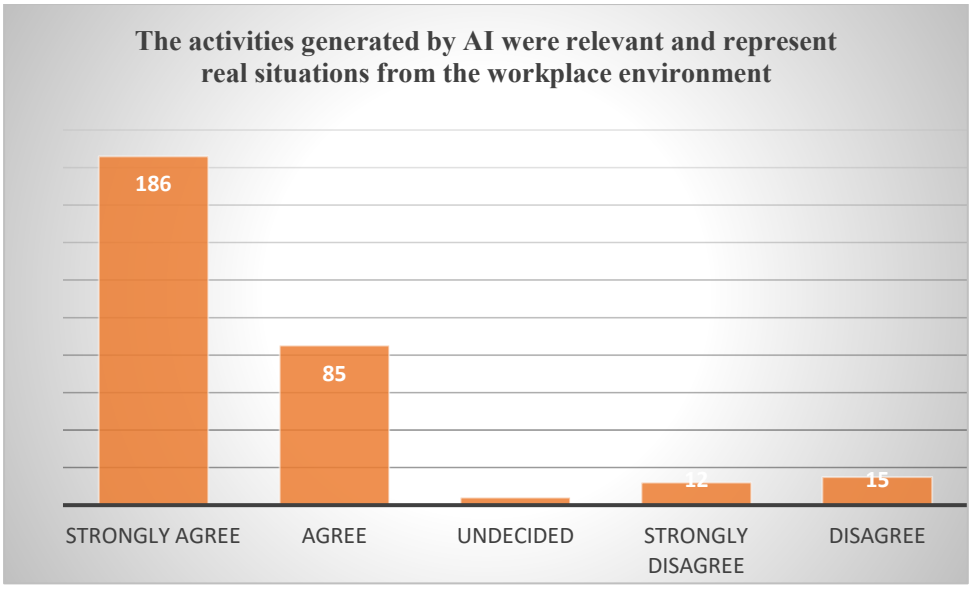

Figure 3: Students' assessment of AI generated activities

Despite the fact that the initial reactions of students were pretty precarious regarding the integration of AI in soft skills training, the subsequent assessment of students, as the figures in the above graph shows, were quite different from the initial reactions. Students grow convinced about the relevance of the course material and classroom activities in soft skills development. The big majority of respondents (186) indicated that the AI generated activities represent authentic situations of the workplace environment. AI has proved its capacity to provide students with learning paths crafted to deliver activities and scenarios perfectly adapted to each skill. Classroom observation shows a full interaction of students with classroom activities. They got the impression that they act in real workplace environment with all its features when engaged in roleplay scenarios. AI generated activities promote self-confidence and assurance among students and offer a pleasurable learning environment. This was further confirmed through the below subsequent questionnaire item.

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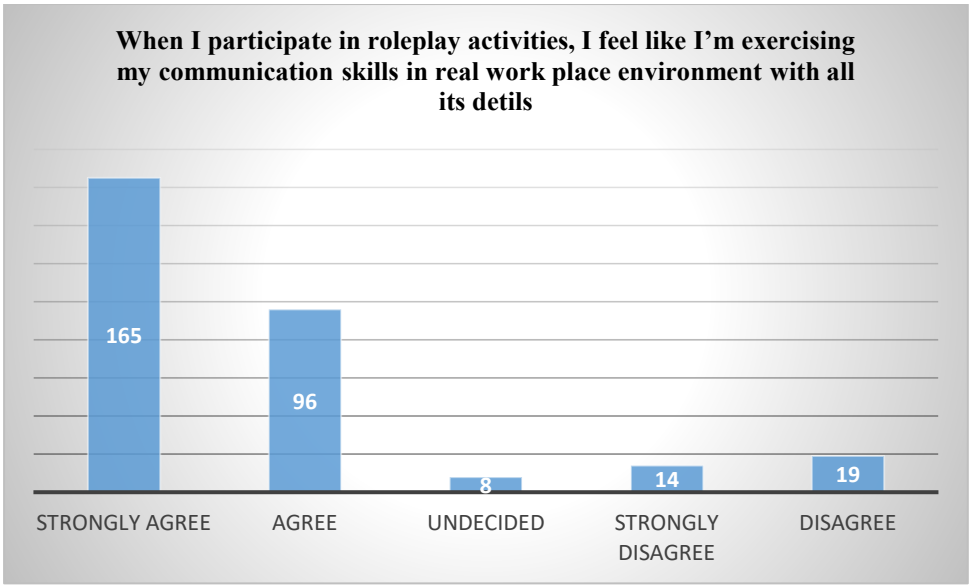

Figure 4: Students' assessment of AI generated roleplay activities

Interestingly, the big part of students also confirmed their attraction to AI roleplay activities as they got the impression that they are exercising real-world professional tasks. AI has made soft skills learning more attractive through simulations which allow learners to confront scenarios similar to reality. Even more, AI allows students to test their skills and receive instant and constructive feedback. In brief, AI generated roleplay activities make it possible to transform theoretical knowledge into practical skills relevant to soft skills training.

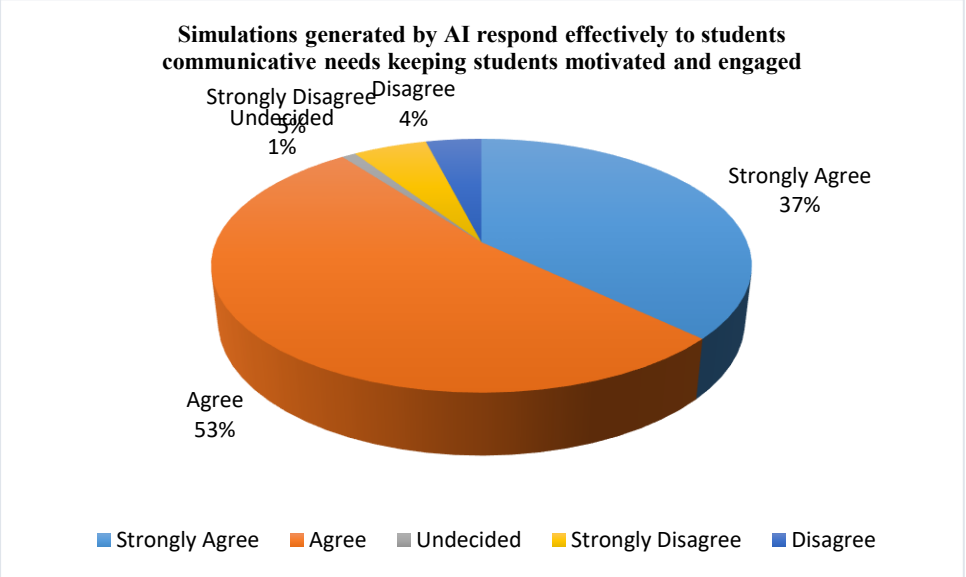

Figure 5: AI generated simulations vs learner needs

With regard to learner needs, which stand as an influential component of the learning operation, AI with its revolutionary potential has succeeded, to a great extent, to provide instructors with various technological apparatuses and platforms which take learner needs into great consideration.

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Since its integration in education, AI has transformed academic learning offering new and effective opportunities for a personalized learning which puts learner needs at the centre of the learning process. AI has proved its capacity to generate simulations, roleplays, scenarios based on learner needs. One of the main characteristics of AI is its ability to generate and personalize course material and classroom activities adapted to each learner. Within a short period of time, AI has equipped soft skills training with a bunch of tools and platforms such as Didask, Rehearsal, Disco, and Virtual Speech and others which offer the possibility to personalize and generate course content and classroom activities adapted to each learner. As the figures in the above graph show, the big part of respondents (90%) either agreed or strongly agreed that the various simulations generated by AI platforms met their needs and acted accordingly to fill in those gaps with the convenient input required to enhance different skills at different instances. Also, the instant feedback provided by AI platforms allows learners to assess the quality of their performance, the effectiveness of their responses and guide them to the best practices to adopt in various situations.

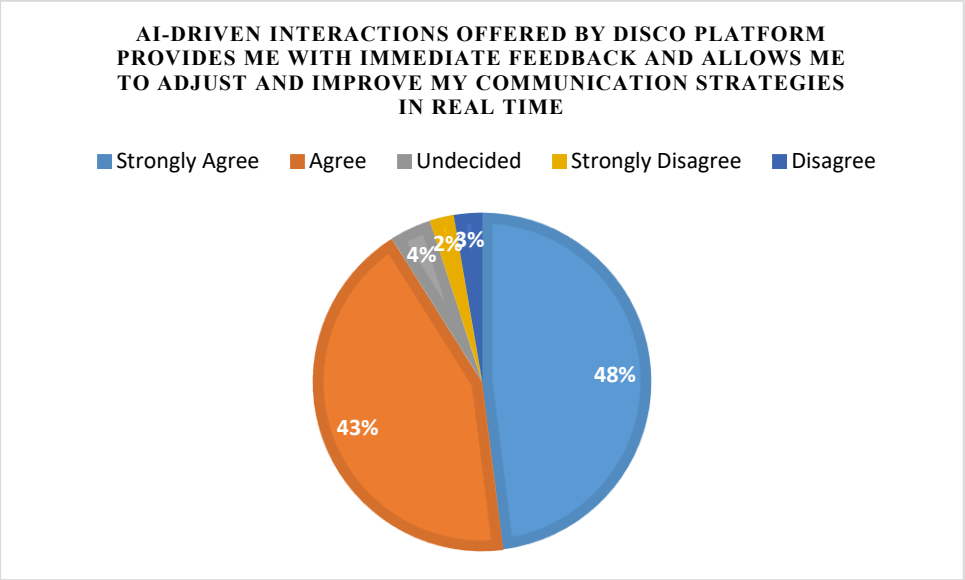

Figure 6: AI-driven interactions/communicative simulations to promote communication skills for professional settings

As indicated in the above graph, the big part of respondents (91%) either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Based on their experience with the AI powered platform: Virtual Public Speaking simulations designed for improving communication skill, learners could easily tell the difference, in terms of practicality and effectiveness, between traditional methods and the AI powered communication platforms and tools. The findings reveal important development in learner performance and engagement through AI generated soft skills content and activities. AI generated communicative simulations, for instance, offered a more interactive and immersive learning experience compared to traditional classroom activities. As a classroom observer, I could tell that learners were completely engaged with the platform enjoying the communicative facilities

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offered by the AI which served to increase their confidence and interpersonal communication in classroom debates over professional and authentic topics. The simulations offered by Virtual Public Speaking allowed students to practice through authentic scenarios which helps reducing anxiety and improve adaptability to professional settings. Towards the end of the semester, I could tell that students succeeded to a great extent to refine their conversational skills through instant feedback on language use, pronunciation, choice of words and speech patterns.

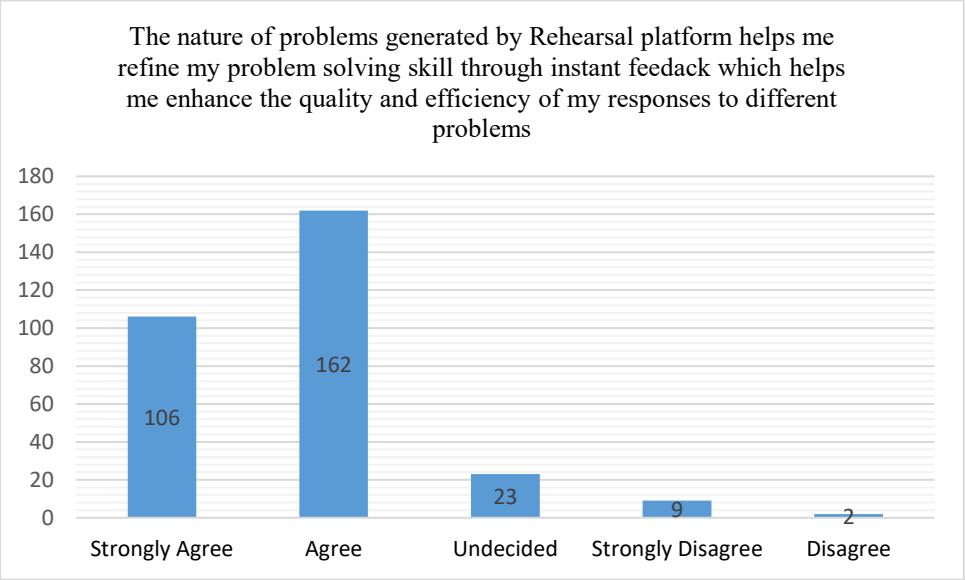

Figure 7: AI generated problems helps students refine their problem-solving skill

Problem-solving was another skill introduced to students through material and activities generated by the AI to test its efficacy and practicality in comparison with previous traditional methods. As the figures above indicate, the big majority of respondents either agreed (162) or strongly agreed (106) that the nature of problems generated by the AI help them be familiar with workplace problems and challenges. Even more, working with such authentic problems helps them refine their problem-solving skill and lead them to generate effective solutions to problems very identical to those of the professional milieu. AI provides students with strategies to adopt while dealing with different problems and issues designed to assist students putting into practice their problem-solving skill. This includes, for instance, defining the problem, diagnosing the root cause of the problem, brainstorming different solutions, choosing the best solution, and ultimately implementing the solution to test its efficacy. The best part of this procedure is the instant feedback provided by AI which allows students to measure the practicality of the solution and act accordingly. This immediate feedback enables students to correct strategies promptly, leading to quicker mastery.

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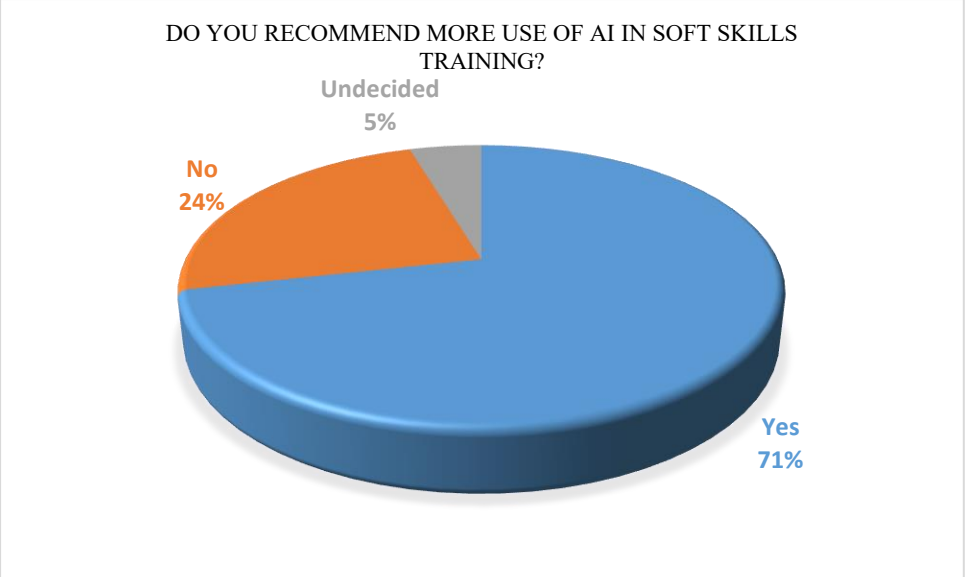

Figure 8: Students` views about further use of AI in soft skills training

The last item in the questionnaire was formulated to learn if students would recommend further use of AI in soft skills training after one semester of their experience in learning soft skills through the use of AI generated course material and classroom activities. Surprisingly, the large share of students (71%) seems to like working with AI platforms and recommend more integration of AI in soft skills course. This indicates that AI potential succeeds to a great extent to meet students' expectations as it succeeds to cope for the needs of students in the most practical way possible.

To say, is the fact that these AI platforms despite their recent emergence in the academic sphere, they have succeeded to a considerable extent to fill in the gaps of traditional methods of teaching and learning soft skills. Features like authentic scenarios, roleplays, real world conversations/simulations, instant feedback and most importantly the personalization feature which allows practitioners to tailor course content and classroom activities depending on learners needs. The findings generated from the present study show that despite the initial perplexing reactions of students towards the use of AI in soft skills teaching and learning, their ultimate feedback was quite positive as they came to understand the added value of these AI platforms designed specifically for soft skills training. The big part of respondents enjoyed working with these platforms being introduced, for the first time, to such revolutionary features such as the immersive scenarios offered by Rehearsal platform where students interact with authentic situations from the workplace and got the opportunity to put into play what they learned from the theoretical part and most importantly they got this instant feedback which tests their performance and highlights positive and negative parts of the performance. Also, the simulations and roleplays generated by Virtual Speech platform offers realistic communicative environments on different professional topics allowing students to practice negotiation, public speaking and even conflict

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resolution. AI analyses students' verbal communication and check clarity and precision in pronunciation highlighting areas for further improvement. Disco platform, on the other hand, examines speech patterns, tone of voice highlighting students' strengths and weaknesses and help them refine their communication skills.

Most students, also, reported positive experiences with these AI platforms focussing on the added value of AI with regard to the learning and mastery of different soft skills. The study reveals important progress in students' engagement and performance through AI generated course material and classroom activities. The study focuses mainly, as mentioned earlier, on communication skills using three different AI platforms namely, Disco platform designed for communication skills and allows practitioners to generate discussion posts, answer learners' questions instantly and suggests prompts to improve learners' participation in classroom debates and discussions. The second used AI platform is Virtual Speech which is an AI powered platform designed for public speaking and leadership skills. It provides learners with a variety of roleplays and practice activities intended to enhance communication skills. The third AI platform used in the present study is Rehearsal which is based on a video approach that incorporates AI features providing learners with personalized material and feedback on presentation and communication skills allowing them to improve their skills effectively. Besides, Rehearsal focusses on refining other skills like time management, conflict resolution, and public speaking.

AI powered platforms show their ability to revolutionize the teaching and learning practices of soft skills. AI has succeeded to a considerable extent to compensate the defects of traditional methods, particularly in its ability to generate personalized course content and classroom activities which effectively and efficiently respond to learners needs. Moreover, characteristics such as personalization, authenticity, instant feedback and the ability to meet learners needs, have qualified the use of AI powered platforms in soft skills training to be a promising approach in the academic sphere.

The bellow table summarises the employed AI platforms in soft skills training highlighting their capacities to improve and refine a number of skills amongst students through different classroom activities and course material generated by each platform.

Platform	Best for	Classroom activity	Key features of the platform
Rehearsal/Disco	Communication skills	Roleplays and simulations inspired from the workplace	allows practitioners to generate discussion posts, answer learners' questions instantly and suggests prompts to improve learners' participation in classroom debates and discussions

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Disco	Problem solving skill/ Time management/ Conflict resolution, and Public Speaking.	Classroom debates and discussions/Simulations	based on a video approach that incorporates AI features providing learners with personalized material and feedback on presentation and communication skills allowing them to improve their skills effectively. Working with authentic problems helps students refine their problem-solving skill and lead them to generate effective solutions to problems very identical to those of the professional milieu. AI provides students with strategies to adopt while dealing with different problems and issues designed to assist students putting into practice their problem-solving skill.
Virtual Speech	Negotiation	Roleplays and practice activities	designed for public speaking and leadership skills. It provides learners with a variety of roleplays and practice activities intended to enhance communication skills.
Virtual Speech	Public speaking	Roleplays/Debates	Authentic scenarios, roleplays, real world conversations/simulations, instant feedback and most importantly the personalization feature which allows practitioners to tailor course content and classroom activities depending on learners needs.
Virtual Speech	Leadership	Roleplays/Teamwork projects/authentic scenarios	AI generated scenarios involve students to take the lead in different situations and test their ability of decision making and leadership.

Table 2: AI generated course material and classroom activities for different skills

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Despite all the aforementioned advantages of AI, it is worth nothing that the adoption of AI in the teaching and learning practices is not devoid of inconveniencies as well. The present study shows that AI disregards ethical and moral concerns, particularly when it comes to data privacy. Up till now, users and practitioners haven't fully figure out how exactly AI platforms operate and how to handle them effectively in the classroom environment. Thus, data privacy remains at risk until educational institutions take strict measures to protect learners and practitioners' data to ensure convenient and confidential use of AI technology in educational sphere. Hence incorporating AI into the curriculum requires careful planning and consideration.

Classroom observation reveals also that students, being influenced by the AI technology, have become susceptible to depend more often on AI platforms like Chatgbt to get quick answers to different kinds of exercises, generate essays and home works. This increasing dependency on AI has become alarming given its bad effects on the mental capacities of students. The use of AI in and outside the classroom encourages dependence on AI technology instead of fostering independent critical thinking.

There is also a growing concern among practitioners that the rapidly increasing abilities of AI may soon replace the practitioner in the classroom environment. The rapid expansion of AI technology through all facets of life, particularly education, has driven many practitioners to take AI as a potential threat to their role in the classroom environment. The availability of AI platforms designed for different learning purposes may drive students to be more dependent on AI tools and facilities disregarding the role of practitioners in the classroom. Therefore, educational institutions are highly required to continually evaluate how AI can serve to complement rather than disrupt the role of the practitioner and traditional teaching practices.

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Conclusion

Soft skills remain valuable assets for personal and professional development of students. Studies have proved its high role in bridging the gap between the graduates' competencies and the demands of the marketplace. Hence, it is important for the learning environment to be a place that promotes the necessary skills and competencies among students to meet the demands of the job market. Yet, different and unique challenges were raised, particularly about pedagogy as soft skills training has always been a complex undertaking. The process of including soft skills in higher education is not always straightforward and often entails complex decisions regarding the skills to be included and the mode of teaching them.

According to the findings of the present study, the use of AI in soft skills has proved its effectiveness being characterised by new revolutionary features that were complex and inaccessible a little while back. With AI tools and platforms such as Disco, Rehearsal, Virtual Speech, and others even practitioners with little experience in technological expertise can create personalised and interactive course content and classroom activities offering their students a rapid and effectives skills development opportunities. The implementation of AI in soft skills not only simplifies the design of courses but also enhances the learning experiences of students through instant feedback, authentic simulations/roleplays, and tailored scenarios inspired from the professional milieu. These innovative features offer practical solutions which meet learners needs in an effective way.

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Appendices

STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire is administered within the framework of a research study and aims at exploring how ESP courses contribute to the development and delivery of employability skills to graduate students in the Moroccan context. Basically, the research examines the extent to which the ESP course content that teachers use fits the actual requirements of the workplace.

You are kindly requested to devote 10 minutes to fill in the questionnaire and please note that your answers will be held into great confidentiality as the collected data will be used solely within this research project and by large in the academic area.

Thank you so much for your participation and cooperation

Thank you so much for your participation and cooperation

Background Information

Sex: **Male** ◯ **Female** ◯

Age: **19** ◯ **20** ◯ **21** ◯ **22** ◯ **Other** ◯

Semester: **5th semester** ◯ **6th semester** ◯

Major: **Mathematics and Computer Science** ◯ **Business Administration** ◯

What was your reaction when you first heard that Soft skills are taught through ESP courses?

Very Satisfied ◯ Quite Satisfied ◯ Unsatisfied ◯ Very Unsatisfied ◯

What was your reaction when you learned that Soft Skills material is generated by AI platform?

Very Confusing ◯ Pretty Confusing ◯ Suspicious ◯ Delighted ◯

Do you think that Soft Skills should be an integral part of the school curriculum?

Strongly disagree ◯ Disagree ◯ Undecided ◯ Agree ◯ Strongly Agree ◯

1. Course Design

Please rate the following statements according to your learning experience with Soft Skills training:

I felt the importance of the course as soon as I was introduced to it:

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Strongly disagree ◯ Disagree ◯ Undecided ◯ Agree ◯ Strongly Agree ◯

The course introduced me to employability skills through English language and to various new ideas which I consider useful to me to integrate the professional milieu:

Strongly disagree ◯ Disagree ◯ Undecided ◯ Agree ◯ Strongly Agree ◯

Given the significance of the course, I was fully interested to achieve the course objectives as listed in the course description

Strongly disagree ◯ Disagree ◯ Undecided ◯ Agree ◯ Strongly Agree ◯

The course content was well structured and sufficient time was allocated to each theme

Strongly disagree ◯ Disagree ◯ Undecided ◯ Agree ◯ Strongly Agree ◯

Generally, the course content was relevant to the demands of the job market

Strongly disagree ◯ Disagree ◯ Undecided ◯ Agree ◯ Strongly Agree ◯

The course met my expectations

Strongly disagree ◯ Disagree ◯ Undecided ◯ Agree ◯ Strongly Agree ◯

The course met my needs

Strongly disagree ◯ Disagree ◯ Undecided ◯ Agree ◯ Strongly Agree ◯

The topics covered were relevant to the course objectives

Strongly disagree ◯ Disagree ◯ Undecided ◯ Agree ◯ Strongly Agree ◯

Course Activities

The activities generated by AI were relevant and represent real situations from the workplace environment

Strongly disagree ◯ Disagree ◯ Undecided ◯ Agree ◯ Strongly Agree ◯

When I participate in roleplay activities, I feel like I'm exercising a real task in the work place

Strongly disagree ◯ Disagree ◯ Undecided ◯ Agree ◯ Strongly Agree ◯

Simulations generated by AI respond effectively to students input keeping students motivated and involved

Strongly disagree ◯ Disagree ◯ Undecided ◯ Agree ◯ Strongly Agree ◯

Enhanced personalised learning activities generated by AI platforms allows me to master various skills at my own pace

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Strongly disagree ◯ Disagree ◯ Undecided ◯ Agree ◯ Strongly Agree ◯

AI-driven interactions provides me with immediate feedback and allows me to adjust and improve my communication strategies in real time.

Strongly disagree ◯ Disagree ◯ Undecided ◯ Agree ◯ Strongly Agree ◯

Disco platform simulates scenarios and interactions, providing me with a authentic professional environment to practice and develop my communication skills.

Strongly disagree ◯ Disagree ◯ Undecided ◯ Agree ◯ Strongly Agree ◯

Disco provides us with realistic communication scenarios inspired from real professional milieux which allows us to put into play what we have learned in the theoretical part.

Strongly disagree ◯ Disagree ◯ Undecided ◯ Agree ◯ Strongly Agree ◯

Virtual Speech platform could simulate real-life conversations which enhances our interpersonal skills and allows us to practice active listening, empathy, and emotional intelligence in the classroom context and beyond.

Strongly disagree ◯ Disagree ◯ Undecided ◯ Agree ◯ Strongly Agree ◯

Rehearsal generated simulations on Problem-solving skill replicate real-world challenges, allowing us to apply this skill in practical, work-related contexts.

Strongly disagree ◯ Disagree ◯ Undecided ◯ Agree ◯ Strongly Agree ◯

Virtual Speech platform offers me a range of role-plays and practice exercises designed to enhance communication skills.

Strongly disagree ◯ Disagree ◯ Undecided ◯ Agree ◯ Strongly Agree ◯

Was it easy for you to learn soft skills through this new hybrid course design?

Very easy ◯ Quite easy ◯ Undecided ◯ Difficult ◯ Very difficult ◯

Do you support the assumption that AI has supplemented and enhanced the previous traditional methods of learning?

Yes ◯ **No** ◯ **Undecided** ◯

Was it practical and effective to combine traditional methods and AI strategies to achieve the course objectives?

Very practical ◯ quite practical ◯ Unpractical ◯ very unpractical ◯

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The hybrid style of the course provided us with many opportunities to interact with the professor and fellow students on different topics

Strongly disagree ◯ Disagree ◯ Undecided ◯ Agree ◯ Strongly Agree ◯

Do you recommend more use of AI in soft skills training?

Yes ◯ No ◯ undecided ◯

Thank you once more for your cooperation