

Integrating Soft Skills in High School EFL Through Constructivist Pedagogy

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Abstract

Background: Soft skills are increasingly expected outcomes of secondary education, yet their integration into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching remains difficult in examination-oriented settings. **Methods:** This qualitative exploratory study examined face-to-face interview notes from eight high school EFL teachers working across the six districts of Fes, Morocco. Teachers reflected on a constructivist communicative group task involving preference sharing, group negotiation, a budget constraint, and presentation. The data were analysed thematically. **Results:** Teachers reported student-centred interaction, high engagement, and observable practice of communication, collaboration, active listening, negotiation, compromise, decision-making, critical thinking, problem-solving, leadership, and adaptability. Sentence frames, task progression, authentic purpose, and the budget constraint were perceived as central supports. Large classes, uneven participation, time pressure, limited resources, low confidence, and assessment difficulties were persistent barriers. **Conclusions:** Constructivist EFL tasks can integrate language learning with soft-skills practice when teachers provide explicit language scaffolds, equitable group structures, reflection, and process-oriented assessment. The study offers practical guidance for high school EFL teachers in Fes and comparable contexts.

Keywords: constructivism, EFL, high school, soft skills, transversal competencies, collaborative learning, Morocco, qualitative research

1. Introduction

Secondary education is increasingly expected to prepare learners for academic participation, civic life, and changing social and professional demands. This expectation has drawn sustained attention to soft skills, also described as transversal competencies or social and emotional skills. Although terminology varies, the relevant competences often include communication, collaboration, critical and innovative thinking, problem-solving, self-management, adaptability, and learning to learn. UNESCO identifies communication, collaboration, problem-solving, entrepreneurship, and learning to learn among skills commonly referenced across education policy documents, while the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) identifies cooperation, curiosity, self-control, sociability, and stress resistance as competencies associated with important student outcomes (OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2015).

For high school EFL learners, these skills cannot be treated as a separate curricular addition that takes place after language instruction. English lessons provide recurring opportunities to listen to others, articulate a view, negotiate meaning, respond to disagreement, evaluate information, jointly solve problems, and reflect on performance. Yet these possibilities are not automatically realised. In classrooms dominated by explanation, isolated grammar practice, and recall-based testing, learners may have limited opportunities to use English as a social tool for meaningful action. The question is therefore pedagogical: how can EFL teachers design learning experiences in which language development and soft-skills development occur through the same classroom activity?

Constructivism offers a relevant response because it treats learning as active meaning-making rather than passive reception. Piaget's work foregrounds learners' active cognitive construction of knowledge through assimilation, accommodation, and equilibration (Piaget, 1970). Vygotsky's sociocultural account gives particular importance to interaction, language, cultural tools, and guided participation. His concepts of the zone of proximal development and scaffolding are especially pertinent to EFL classrooms, where learners can perform beyond their independent level through carefully designed teacher and peer support (Vygotsky, 1978).

The constructivist orientation is compatible with communicative and task-based EFL pedagogy. Learners work with meaningful content, draw on prior knowledge, exchange perspectives, make decisions, and create products for an audience. The teacher does not disappear; rather, the teacher designs tasks, provides language resources, monitors participation, asks questions, and gradually withdraws support as learners gain control. Such practices can make the use of English purposeful while creating visible occasions for the use of soft skills.

The present study focuses on high school EFL teachers working across the six districts of Fes, Morocco. It examines teachers' accounts of a structured communicative group task in which students expressed preferences, discussed alternatives, worked within a budget constraint, and reached a group decision. The study does not claim that the activity caused measured gains in soft skills. Instead, it investigates teachers' interpretations of the interaction patterns, competencies, helpful task features, and implementation barriers associated with the activity.

The study was guided by four research questions:

- (1) How did high school EFL teachers describe student interaction and engagement during a constructivist communicative group task?
- (2) Which soft skills did teachers report observing during the task?
- (3) Which features of the task did teachers consider effective for combining English learning with soft-skills practice?
- (4) What challenges did teachers identify when implementing and assessing soft-skills-oriented EFL activities?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Constructivism and EFL Learning

Constructivism challenges the view that learning consists mainly of receiving information from an expert. It assumes that learners interpret new information through prior experience and existing understanding. In Piagetian terms, learning develops when learners relate new experiences to existing schemas and modify those schemas when necessary (Piaget, 1970). In language education, this implies that learners need opportunities to test meanings, revise assumptions, and apply language in contexts that are more complex than memorising decontextualised forms.

Social constructivism adds a relational dimension. Vygotsky (1978) argued that higher mental functions develop through social activity before becoming internalised. Classroom interaction is therefore not merely practice following learning; it is part of the learning process itself. Peer discussion can expose learners to alternative formulations, models of language use, and strategies for resolving misunderstanding. A teacher can support this process through scaffolding, including modelling, prompts, examples, visual aids, functional language, guided questions, and staged task sequences.

In EFL settings, constructivist instruction supports a shift from teacher-dominated talk towards learner participation. This shift should not be interpreted as unstructured group work. Productive collaboration requires an accessible task goal, appropriate linguistic support, clear

roles, accountability, and opportunities for feedback. Hmelo-Silver et al. (2007) argue that inquiry and problem-based learning require scaffolding if learners are to engage productively with demanding tasks. This observation is important for EFL classes because students may need support with both the target language and the social processes required to work collaboratively.

2.2. Soft skills as Transversal Competencies

In this study, soft skills refer to transferable cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal capabilities used across learning and life contexts. The term overlaps with transversal competencies and social and emotional skills. UNESCO (2015) describes transversal skills as competencies relevant to life and work, including communication, collaboration, problem-solving, innovation, and learning to learn. The OECD framework similarly recognises that social and emotional skills are linked to educational, occupational, health, and well-being outcomes (OECD, 2019).

The present analysis concentrates on skills that can be observed or credibly inferred from the teachers' accounts of the focal task: communication, collaboration, active listening, negotiation, compromise, decision-making, critical thinking, problem-solving, leadership, adaptability, and self-regulation. These skills are interdependent. For example, a learner cannot contribute effectively to a group decision only by speaking; the learner must also listen, evaluate options, justify a position, respond to disagreement, and accept or propose revisions.

2.3. Constructivist Tasks for Soft-Skills Integration

Task-based language teaching provides a practical route for constructivist EFL instruction. A task creates a communicative purpose that requires learners to use language to achieve an outcome. Ellis (2003) explains that tasks orient learners towards meaning while allowing attention to form to emerge in relation to communicative need. Group planning, surveys, problem-solving, debates, information-gap activities, simulations, and project work can therefore support linguistic development and soft-skills practice simultaneously.

The focal classroom activity was designed around a common group objective. Students first considered individual preferences, then discussed them in groups using sentence frames, responded to a budget limitation, revised their plans, and presented a decision. This design created a need for learners to speak, listen, compare, justify, disagree politely, negotiate, and decide. The gradual progression is consistent with scaffolding: learners first prepare individually, then use structured language with peers, then address a more complex constraint, and finally present an agreed outcome.

Assessment must also reflect this integration. Traditional language tests can measure certain forms of vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, but they may not capture how learners collaborate, make decisions, or use language to solve a problem. Constructivist assessment therefore benefits from observation checklists, analytic rubrics, self-assessment, peer feedback, reflective journals, and portfolios. Rubrics can make expectations transparent and support formative feedback when they include both language-related and collaboration-related criteria (Reddy & Andrade, 2010).

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design and Setting

This study used a qualitative exploratory design within a constructivist orientation. It aimed to understand how teachers interpreted student interaction, engagement, soft-skills practice, and implementation challenges in relation to a communicative EFL activity. The study was conducted in Fes, Morocco, across all six administrative districts of the city. The focus on teachers' situated accounts was appropriate because the study sought rich descriptions of classroom processes rather than statistical estimates of intervention effects.

3.2. Participants

The participants were eight high school EFL teachers working in Fes. All participants had experience with high school English teaching and were able to comment on classroom communication, group work, language support, and assessment concerns. To preserve confidentiality, teacher identities are not reported in the manuscript. Participants are identified as T1 to T8. The sample was purposive because participants were selected for their direct knowledge of the task and the high school EFL context.

3.3. The Constructivist Communicative Task

The focal activity was a structured group decision-making task built around planning a socially relevant event. The task was organised into four phases as displayed in Table 1. In Phase 1, learners identified individual preferences and prepared ideas. In Phase 2, they shared preferences in groups, supported by sentence frames such as "I prefer ... because ..." and "Do you like ...?". In Phase 3, the teacher introduced a budget constraint that required groups to compare options, justify priorities, and revise their plans. In Phase 4, groups presented their final decisions. Teachers described their own role as giving instructions, monitoring groups, providing prompts when necessary, and managing the transition to the budget phase.

Table 1. Structure of the Constructivist Communicative Task

Phase	Learner activity	Scaffolding	Soft skills targeted
1. Individual preparation	Select preferences and prepare reasons	Vocabulary support; sentence frames	Self-regulation; decision-making
2. Group exchange	Share preferences and discuss alternatives	Functional language for expressing opinions	Communication; listening; collaboration
3. Budget constraint	Revise a shared plan within limitations	Language for suggesting, agreeing, disagreeing, and justifying	Critical thinking; negotiation; compromise; problem-solving
4. Presentation	Present the group decision and respond to feedback	Presentation prompts; teacher and peer feedback	Public speaking; teamwork; reflection

Note. The table is based on the eight face-to-face teacher interview notes collected in Fes, Morocco.

3.4. Data Collection

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews with the eight teachers. The interviewer took written notes during or immediately following the interviews. The interview questions (Appendix A) addressed four areas: interaction patterns; learner engagement and observed soft skills; task features that supported language learning and soft-skills practice; and challenges related to implementation. All participants provided verbal consent before participating. Because the study relied on interview notes rather than audio recordings and verbatim transcripts, quotations used in the results section are presented as noted teacher statements and should be read as close representations rather than exact transcript excerpts.

3.5. Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The notes were analysed through thematic analysis, following the flexible approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved repeated reading of the notes, initial coding of recurrent ideas, grouping related codes, reviewing candidate themes, and naming themes that addressed the research questions. Codes included student talk, peer interaction, engagement, teamwork, active listening, negotiation, compromise, critical thinking, problem-solving, leadership, adaptability, scaffolding, unequal participation, large classes, time pressure, assessment, and examination pressure. Themes were developed by comparing recurring and divergent statements across participants.

Several steps were taken to support analytic trustworthiness. The analysis retained accounts of both benefits and constraints, rather than selecting only positive statements. The results use anonymised participant codes and present representative statements alongside cross-participant patterns. Nevertheless, the use of interview notes, the small purposive sample, and the absence of student interview data constrain the breadth and precision of the claims. These issues are addressed in the discussion.

4. Results

4.1. Student-Centred Interaction and Learner Engagement

All eight teachers described the activity as predominantly student-centred. Teachers reported that they spoke mainly when setting up the task, clarifying instructions, monitoring group work, or introducing the budget limitation. Students carried most of the peer discussion. T4 estimated that students talked for approximately 80% of the activity, while T5 estimated at least 85%. Although these estimates were not based on formal interaction analysis, they indicate a consistent perception that the task altered the usual distribution of classroom talk.

Students communicated in simple English, often using the provided sentence frames. Teachers also reported gestures, eye contact, pointing to worksheets, counting on fingers, and occasional Arabic code-switching for clarification. T1 noted that learners used “I prefer ... because ...” and “Do you like ...?” frequently. T6 similarly reported that students used simple English sentences, sentence frames, gestures, and Arabic when they lacked vocabulary. These accounts suggest that language scaffolds supported participation even when learners had limited proficiency.

Engagement was generally described as high, particularly in the discussion and budget phases. T1 referred to animated discussions, leaning in, gesturing, and smiling. T3 described engagement as consistently high across the four phases. Some teachers identified variation: T4 reported that engagement increased as the task progressed, and T8 found that food and activity discussions generated stronger engagement than numerical calculations. This variation indicates that personal relevance and the level of task difficulty affected participation.

4.2. Soft Skills Observed During the Task

Teachers consistently identified communication and collaboration as the most visible competencies (see Table 2). Students expressed preferences, asked questions, responded to proposals, and attempted to reach agreement. Participants also observed active listening when learners waited for peers, considered different viewpoints, and responded to suggestions. T5 described a broad range of skills, including communication, teamwork, negotiation, compromise, critical thinking, problem-solving, time management, and conflict resolution.

Negotiation and compromise emerged most clearly when groups had to make shared choices. T1 observed learners accepting choices that differed from their personal preferences. T7 referred to negotiation and compromise as learners discussed options and

respected differing opinions. Teachers often associated critical thinking with the need to compare options and justify choices, while they associated problem-solving with the introduction of the budget limitation. T3 stated that learners showed empathy when they considered others' preferences and adaptability when they adjusted plans because of the budget constraint.

Table 2. Teacher-Reported Soft Skills in the Communicative Task

Competency	How teachers described it	Illustrative task moment
Communication	Expressing preferences, asking questions, agreeing and disagreeing	Using "I prefer ... because ..." during group discussion
Collaboration	Working toward a common group outcome	Sharing ideas and building a joint event plan
Active listening	Waiting, responding to peer suggestions, considering viewpoints	Listening before accepting or revising a proposal
Negotiation and compromise	Reconciling different preferences to reach consensus	Changing preferred options in response to group decisions
Critical thinking	Comparing alternatives and justifying choices	Evaluating which options were most appropriate or feasible
Problem-solving	Addressing constraints and revising plans	Responding to the budget limitation
Leadership and adaptability	Organising discussion and adjusting to changed conditions	Guiding peers or revising a plan after new information

Note. The table is based on the eight face-to-face teacher interview notes collected in Fes, Morocco.

4.3. Effective Task Features

Teachers described the authentic communication purpose as the most effective feature of the activity. The requirement to reach a group decision gave learners a reason to use English beyond completing isolated language exercises. T2 stated that the real-world context made language meaningful and that the group decision requirement "forced genuine communication." T5 similarly reported that learners used English functionally rather than merely grammatically.

Sentence frames were frequently identified as useful. Teachers perceived them as a form of support that reduced anxiety and gave learners a starting point for interaction without controlling every response. T1 stated that sentence frames "gave structure without restricting creativity." T7 explained that visible sentence frames reduced anxiety. Teachers also valued the sequence from individual preparation to group work, because it allowed lower-confidence learners time to prepare ideas before speaking.

The budget constraint was another widely valued feature. T3 described it as particularly effective for problem-solving, and T7 reported that it increased engagement. The constraint required groups to revise decisions rather than simply list preferences. It therefore increased the

need for justification, negotiation, and compromise. Teachers saw this as a productive moment where language use and cognitive demand became closely connected.

4.4. Unequal participation and group-process challenges

Although teachers valued group interaction, several reported unequal participation. T2 observed that some groups had balanced turn-taking while others were dominated by a vocal student. T6 reported similar differences, and T8 noted that some learners required encouragement to contribute. These reports show that group work did not automatically lead to equitable participation.

Teachers proposed several modifications. T2 recommended role cards such as timekeeper or recorder. T3 suggested peer assessment after group presentations. T5 and T7 recommended metacognitive reflection, in which students identify the skills they used and evaluate the effectiveness of their collaboration. These suggestions indicate that teachers viewed soft skills as needing explicit instructional attention rather than merely emerging incidentally from group work.

4.5. Constraints on Implementation and Assessment

Large class sizes were the most frequently reported practical barrier (see Table 3). Teachers found it difficult to monitor multiple groups, provide timely assistance, and observe each learner fairly. T1 explained that some groups needed support while the teacher was already helping others. T2 and T8 similarly linked large classes to inadequate monitoring and feedback.

Time pressure was another recurring concern. Teachers stated that collaborative tasks required more time than traditional lessons, especially when learners had low proficiency or when groups completed stages at different speeds. Some participants also mentioned noise, limited physical space, and the time needed to prepare materials. T4 identified a packed curriculum as a constraint, while T5 referred to exam-focused expectations and the difficulty of justifying soft-skills activities to administrators focused on test scores.

Assessment was described as particularly difficult. Teachers questioned how communication and collaboration could be graded fairly and consistently. T3 identified assessment as the biggest challenge, and T7 referred to the subjective nature of evaluating soft skills. Teachers proposed reflection, peer assessment, clearer roles, and rubrics as possible responses, but they also identified a need for more professional preparation in facilitating and assessing soft skills.

Table 3. Implementation Challenges and Suggested Responses

Challenge	Reported consequence	Teacher-proposed response
Large classes	Limited monitoring, feedback, and individual observation	Stable groups, role cards, concise observation checklists
Unequal participation	Confident learners may dominate; quiet learners may withdraw	Rotating roles and individual accountability
Low proficiency and confidence	Learners rely on Arabic or produce minimal English	Vocabulary support, visual aids, modelling, sentence frames
Time pressure	Tasks take longer; groups finish at different times	Shorter task cycles and extension activities
Assessment difficulty	Soft skills appear subjective and hard to grade	Analytic rubrics, self-assessment, peer feedback, teacher observation
Examination orientation	Students and stakeholders may prioritise testable grammar	Align tasks with language curriculum outcomes

Note. The table is based on the eight face-to-face teacher interview notes collected in Fes, Morocco.

5. Discussion

5.1. Constructivist Interaction as a Context for Soft-Skills Practice

The findings suggest that the focal task created a classroom context in which English was used to accomplish a shared social purpose. Teachers consistently described students as the main speakers, while the teacher assumed a facilitative role. This pattern aligns with social constructivist theory, in which knowledge develops through interaction with people, language, and cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978). In the present task, learners did not merely repeat target expressions. They used available language resources to propose options, respond to peers, negotiate a decision, and revise a plan.

The findings should not be interpreted as proof that learners developed each soft skill to a measurable degree. The data consist of teacher perceptions recorded through interview notes. However, the convergence across eight accounts supports a cautious conclusion: the task made the practice of several soft skills visible to teachers. Communication, collaboration, active listening, negotiation, compromise, critical thinking, and problem-solving were reported repeatedly. This pattern corresponds with international descriptions of transversal competencies, which include communication, collaboration, problem-solving, and learning to learn (UNESCO, 2015).

5.2. The Role of Scaffolding and Task Design

Teachers' accounts indicate that task design, rather than group work alone, supported productive interaction. Sentence frames gave learners functional language for expressing preferences and asking questions. Individual preparation gave learners thinking time before group discussion. The staged sequence gradually increased cognitive and communicative

demand, culminating in the budget constraint. These features resemble scaffolding within the learner's zone of proximal development: support was available at the point of difficulty but learners still had to make their own group decisions (Vygotsky, 1978).

The budget constraint was particularly important because it transformed preference sharing into a problem that required evaluation and revision. This finding is consistent with task-based and problem-based approaches, in which learners use language meaningfully to reach a non-linguistic outcome (Ellis, 2003; Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007). Teachers' emphasis on authentic purpose also supports research suggesting that productive foreign-language tasks can provide space for communication, collaboration, decision-making, and self-management (Medvedeva & Rubtsova, 2021).

5.3. Participation, Assessment, and Institutional Conditions

The results also demonstrate that student-centred pedagogy presents practical challenges. Unequal participation was a recurrent concern. Without role allocation, individual accountability, and teacher monitoring, highly confident learners may control the discussion while quieter learners contribute minimally. A constructivist task therefore requires deliberate group-process design. Rotating roles, turn-taking cards, individual preparation sheets, peer feedback, and short teacher observation cycles can help distribute participation more fairly.

Assessment remains a central issue. Teachers considered soft skills difficult to grade fairly, especially in large classes. This concern is well founded because collaboration and communication are context-dependent and may not be captured by a single product score. A practical response is to use a brief analytic rubric with observable criteria (Appendix B), such as contribution of ideas, listening and response to peers, use of English for interaction, negotiation strategies, and reflection on group work. Students can complete self- and peer-assessments after each task, while the teacher uses a simple observation checklist. This approach does not remove all subjectivity, but it makes expectations visible and creates multiple sources of evidence.

The reported constraints also point to broader institutional issues. Large classes, limited time, resources, examination pressure, and insufficient teacher training may restrict the use of collaborative EFL activities. A recent study of higher-secondary EFL teachers likewise reported that constructivist practices for critical thinking were shaped by time constraints, examination pressure, teacher-centred traditions, and training needs. The present study adds a Fes-based perspective by showing how these constraints affect the integration of a wider set of soft skills in routine high school EFL work.

5.4. Pedagogical Implications

The study suggests five practical implications for high school EFL teachers. First, select tasks with a clear shared outcome so that learners have a genuine reason to communicate. Second, provide accessible language support before asking students to negotiate complex ideas. Third, structure group participation through rotating roles and individual responsibilities. Fourth, introduce a manageable constraint, such as a limited budget, time limit, or ranking requirement, to stimulate justification and problem-solving. Fifth, make soft skills explicit through reflection and an assessment rubric that includes both language and collaboration criteria.

5.5. Limitations

This study has several limitations. It involved a small purposive sample of eight teachers in one city, so the findings should not be generalised statistically to all Moroccan high schools. The data were based on face-to-face interview notes rather than audio-recorded and verbatim-transcribed interviews. As a result, the quotations are close representations of teachers' statements, not verified verbatim transcripts. The study also did not include student interviews, classroom video, systematic observation data, learner products, or pre- and post-measures of soft skills. These limitations mean that the findings represent teacher perceptions of classroom processes rather than direct evidence of learner development.

Future research could address these limitations through classroom observation across several schools, student focus groups, audio-recorded interviews, task artefacts, and a mixed-methods design. Researchers could also examine whether analytic rubrics, peer assessment, and reflective journals improve the visibility and assessment of soft skills over a longer period.

6. Conclusion

This qualitative exploratory study examined how high school EFL teachers across the six districts of Fes perceived the integration of soft skills through a constructivist communicative task. Teachers reported that the task generated predominantly student-centred interaction and created opportunities for learners to practise communication, collaboration, active listening, negotiation, compromise, decision-making, critical thinking, problem-solving, leadership, and adaptability. The most effective features were perceived to be an authentic group purpose, sentence frames, progressive task phases, individual preparation, and a budget constraint requiring revision and consensus.

The findings also show that the integration of soft skills depends on careful design and supportive conditions. Large classes, unequal participation, limited time, low learner

confidence, restricted resources, examination pressure, and assessment difficulties can weaken implementation. Teachers can respond through explicit language scaffolding, structured roles, individual accountability, reflection, peer feedback, and process-oriented rubrics. In this way, EFL instruction can support learners' development as English users and as collaborative, reflective, and problem-solving participants in school and beyond.

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. No financial, personal, or professional relationships have influenced the research, analysis, or conclusions presented in this work.

Notes on Contributors

Mehdi Hanni is a high school English teacher at the Ministry of National Education and a PhD candidate in education. His research focuses on integrating transversal competencies, including critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and collaboration, into educational practice. His interests in language learning, philosophy, and behavioural sciences inform his teaching and his commitment to supporting learners' cognitive, social, and emotional development.

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Appendix A

Teacher Interview Guide

- 1) Describe the interaction patterns you observed. Who did most of the talking, the teacher or the students, and how did the students communicate with each other?
- 2) How engaged were students during the communicative activities, and what soft skills did you observe students practising during the task?
- 3) What was most effective in developing both English language skills and soft skills? What could be improved?
- 4) What challenges do you face in implementing these soft-skills activities?

Appendix B

Sample Analytic Observation Rubric

Table B1. Sample Formative Rubric for Language Use and Soft-Skills Practice

Criterion	Beginning	Developing	Proficient
English for interaction	Uses isolated words or relies mainly on L1	Uses sentence frames with frequent support	Uses English to express, respond, and clarify ideas
Contribution	Rarely contributes to group decisions	Contributes when prompted	Contributes relevant ideas and supports group progress
Listening and response	Limited attention to peers	Responds to some peer ideas	Listens actively and responds constructively
Negotiation	Accepts or rejects ideas without explanation	Gives simple reasons for choices	Justifies choices and seeks workable compromise
Reflection	Identifies few learning points	Names a skill used	Explains how the group used skills and what could improve

Note. The table is based on the eight face-to-face teacher interview notes collected in Fes, Morocco.