



## An Initial Assessment of Soft Skills Integration in Emergency Remote Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Learners' Perspective

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### Abstract

Faculty members' soft skills are vital for developing students' knowledge, understanding, values, and skills. How teachers integrate soft skills with the subject matter influences how their students acquire the skills they need in their academic life and beyond. Soft skills are a key factor for students' success—not just in their academic work, but also in their careers. These skills are also highly sought by employers when recruiting new graduates. The main purpose of this study was to determine students' perceptions of soft skills integration in emergency remote learning (ERL) during the COVID-19 pandemic. A self-constructed questionnaire distributed through Google forms was used for data collection. Forty-three Bachelor of Science in Business Administration (BSBA) first-year students from Southern Luzon State University (Philippines) participated in the study. It was found that most BSBA first-year students perceived that soft skills were *moderately integrated* during ERL. There was a mean of 3.16 for personal skills, 3.02 for character-building skills, and 2.95 for organisational skills. It was also found that there was no significant difference in students' perception of the integration of soft skills in emergency remote learning when the students were grouped according to gender and learning modalities. This paper suggests that further study should be conducted with a wider scope.

**Keywords:** soft skills; integration; emergency remote learning; learners

### Introduction

The education system in the Philippines has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some schools, colleges, and universities decided to end the second semester of the academic year (2019–2020) earlier than prescribed. However, some universities chose to continue the semester by providing distance learning to their students. Moreover, during the initial month of the COVID-19 outbreak in the Philippines, semestral classes of higher education institutions were interrupted by the class suspensions. Although most universities were not ready for online or distance learning, they switched immediately and adopted this learning modality so they could continue to provide quality education. Transitioning from traditional learning to distance learning—and integrating soft skills in the course—can be a challenge. Soft skills, in particular, are usually learned in face-to-face classes, and integrating soft skills in distance learning can be challenging for the professors.

Faculty members' soft skills are vital for developing students' knowledge, understanding, values, and skills. However, research shows that tertiary education graduates lack soft skills. According to Sunarto (2015), the main reason for tertiary graduates' failure in their later careers is their inability to master soft skills such as honesty, cooperation, decision-making, problem-solving, and so on. These skills are missing in higher education teaching. If this was an issue among

faculty members before the COVID-19 pandemic, it would be an even bigger challenge in distance learning. One of the vital aspects of Education Sustainable Development (ESD) is to help students develop their attitudes, skills, and knowledge. As such, the key elements of ESD include curricula, approaches to teaching, and students' learning and experience on their academic journey (Ngang et al., 2014).

According to Tang (2018), two aspects of lecturers' soft skills acquisition are effective and quality teaching, and managing student skills. But how can teachers manage students' skills effectively if they are learning at a distance? In the Malaysian context, soft skills can be integrated into all aspects of generic skills that comprise the cognitive elements associated with non-academic skills (Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia, 2006). Although there are no specific soft skills, most of these skills are coupled with positive values, leadership skills, team workforce, communicative skills, and life-long learning. Soft skills are identified as the most important skills in the current global job market, especially in the fast-moving era of technology (Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia, 2006). The reorientation of education for sustainability also relates to the importance of these so-called soft skills. As such, graduates from higher learning institutions who need these skills to meet the requirements of the job market, will be indirectly exposed to the skills envisioned in ESD. Much research and many expert opinions were sought to determine the specific soft skills to be implemented in Malaysian higher learning institutions. Based on the research findings, seven soft skills have been identified to be implemented in all higher learning institutions in Malaysia. They are (1) communication; (2) thinking and problem-solving; (3) team work; (4) life-long learning and information management; (5) entrepreneurship; (6) ethics, morals, and professionalism; (7) leadership. Teachers need to have these skills if students are going to acquire them.

On the other hand, there are two requirements for effective classroom interaction. The first is a pleasant atmosphere in the classroom with friendly relationships among the participants, and the second is encouraging students to become effective communicators in a foreign language (Dagarin, 2004). Classroom interaction is a two-way process; the teacher influences the learners and vice versa. Interaction can proceed harmoniously, or it can be fraught. According to Guerra-Baez (2019), a fundamental challenge for universities is that education must meet current societal needs, and current educational settings must be revised. Moreover, Myers et al. (2014) explained that creating an online environment that develops team building and interpersonal skills is complicated by factors such as student isolation and the individual-centric model of online learning that encourages discrete study rather than teamwork.

This change in the perception of teaching and learning soft skills is fundamental because it recognises that environmental influences affect individual behaviour through intermediate cognitive processes (such as imagination, representation, and thought), which are indispensable for learners' development. That is, the theory of social learning can be the theoretical foundation on which educators can promote and defend the need for direct training in soft skills. Because soft skills are fundamental for students' professional and personal training, comprehensive training is needed in higher education institutions. Soft skills are considered indispensable for the proper exercise of citizenship, respect for human rights, and creative conflict resolution (OECD, 2015). The comprehensive training of university students must not only include the theoretical and practical knowledge relating to a profession, but also methodologies that aim to promote autonomy in learning, creative problem-solving, critical thinking, commitment to society, and persistence in the face of adversity (Sanchez-Ruiz et al., 2011).

Soft skills have several features relating to an individual's ability to manage emotions. These include character attributes, communal courtesy, conveying information, speech and vocabulary, manners, cordiality, and hopefulness—all of which have an effect on social interactions (Klaus, 2008). Soft skills are also considered to be an individual's distinct traits—they raise their

potential to associate with others, to work, and to unlock new opportunities for professional growth (Pratt, 2019). In many instances, soft skills relate to personal characteristics such as positivity, duty, sound judgment, humour, and uprightness. Soft skills include all potentiality which, as well as being practical, might require a person to be other-centered; to be empathetic, sociable, cooperative, peacemaking, communicative, and to lead others. A person might secure an interview by using hard skills, but soft skills can often secure and keep the appointment (Marical, 2012). Furthermore, Muthumanickam (2008) maintains that soft skills also comprise communication, collaboration, emotional stability, an ability to counteract hardship, and decisiveness.

Emergency remote learning is an alternative or unplanned method for teachers to deliver instruction from a distance because the learners were simply not able to physically attend face-to-face classes (Shisley, 2020). COVID-19 posed a threat in the educational institutions that shifted courses to the virtual classroom; many institutions have cancelled face-to-face classes, and have required students to study from home to help avoid the virus (Rahiem, 2020). According to Hodges et al. (2020), ERT is a temporary change in the mode of instruction because of the crisis. It requires using entirely remote teaching approaches for instruction or education that would otherwise be provided face to face or in blended or hybrid courses. They will revert to the previous model once the crisis or emergency has finished.

As mentioned by Raciti (2010), higher education must have a clear intention of strengthening students' personal development and increasing their capacity to recognise and interact with the environment in a responsible, participatory, innovative, ethical, and socially meaningful manner. From an educational perspective that recognises the importance of soft skills, university education is perceived to be more than simply training for the labour market. Professional development is directly related to personal development.

As part of the academic community, faculty members have to ensure that they provide students with quality education, even during disruption to their education due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given the importance of integrating soft skills in emergency remote learning, this study aimed to determine the extent to which tertiary school teachers integrated soft skills in distance learning.

The following were the specific objectives.

1. To identify the distance learning modalities of students in terms of:
  - a. asynchronous
  - b. synchronous
  - c. hybrid
2. To determine the integration of soft skills in emergency remote learning as perceived by the respondents in terms of:
  - a. personal skills
  - b. character-building skills
  - c. organisational skills
3. To test the significant difference in the integration of soft skills in emergency remote learning as by the respondents as to:
  - a. distance learning modality
  - b. gender

## Theoretical framework

This study is based on Kearsley and Schneiderman's (1998) engagement theory, which emerged from the experience of teaching in the electronic and distance education environment. The ultimate concept of engagement theory is that students must have meaningful learning engagement activities and interactions. However, this principle of learning engagement occurs only during the traditional learning process and without technology to facilitate learning engagement. Engagement theory is a conceptual framework for technology-based teaching and learning. This theory is based on the creation of successful collaborative teams that are meaningful to someone outside the classroom. These three components, summarised by relate–create–donate, imply that learning activities: (1) occur in a group context, (2) are project-based, (3) have an external focus. Moreover, Zarzycka et al. (2021) stated that active participation in distance classes, and positive use of standardised online assessment tools, influence the processes of communication and collaboration among students. The study contributes to distance learning literature by adding to our understanding of distance learning during a pandemic, and through the lens of engagement theory. It also has practical implications for all active participants in the educational process.

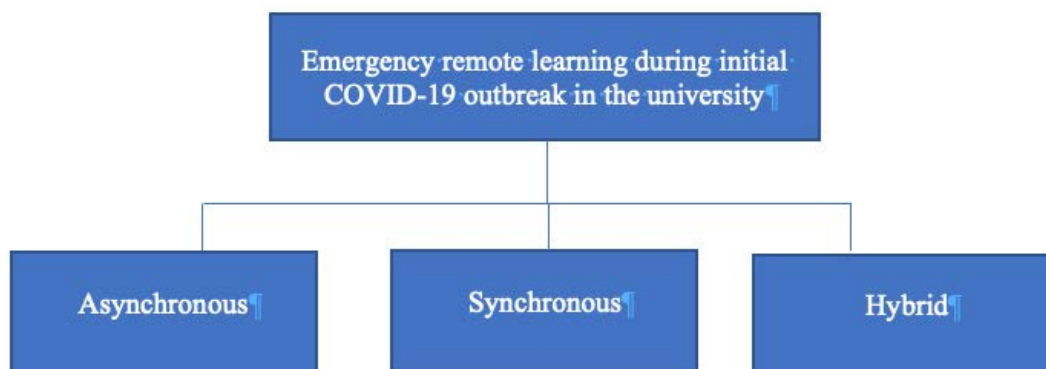
## Methodology

To investigate the integration of soft skills in ERL during the COVID-19 pandemic, the researchers used a quasi-descriptive method. The participants in this study were 43 Bachelor of Science and Business Administration (BSBA) first-year students who evaluated their professors on how they integrated soft skills into ERL during the initial implementation of Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) in the Philippines. The instrument used in this study was a self-constructed questionnaire distributed through Google forms and formatted on a 4-point scale with an interpretation ranging from “highly integrated” to “not integrated”. The data collected from the Google form was tabulated, tallied, and computed using the SPSS/PC 2020 version. The data remained confidential and anonymous. Respondents were asked to not put their names on the questionnaires and were assured that only the researcher would access them.

## Results

The results and analysis of the study were based on the data gathered. Significant findings, interpretation, and discussion are presented using the diagram and tables.

The university students of Southern Luzon State University experienced ERL during the initial implementation of community quarantine in the Philippines. The university used asynchronous, synchronous, and hybrid modalities.



### Learning modalities of students

The data (see Fig. 1) revealed that most Bachelor of Science in Business Administration (BSBA) first-year students use hybrid learning (54.3%; n = 25), followed by asynchronous (26.1%; n = 12) and, lastly, synchronous (19.6%; n = 9). Hybrid was a common choice over synchronous learning because of the cost and connectivity problems with the internet, and some students don't have devices for distance learning. In the hybrid modality, students attend synchronous and asynchronous classes. According to Verde and Valero (2021), Spanish universities also adopted this modality from September 2020. This setup allowed students to continue learning during the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Kearsley and Shneiderman (1998), technology can facilitate involvement in ways that would be impossible to achieve otherwise. Thus, engagement theory is meant to serve as a conceptual foundation for technology-based teaching and learning.

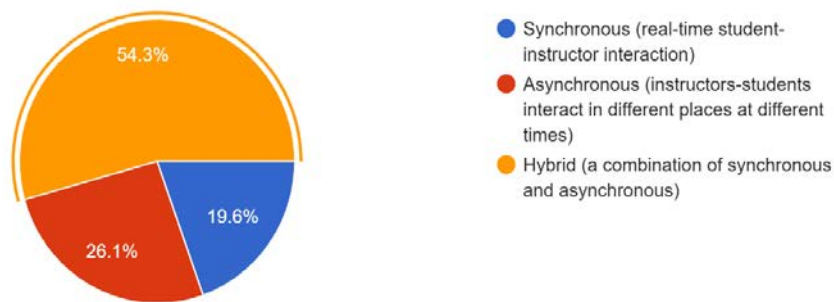


Figure 1 Modalities used by first-year BSBA-students

### Gender

The data revealed that most of the Bachelor of Science in Business Administration (BSBA) first-year students are female (63%; n = 26). Males were 37% (n = 17).

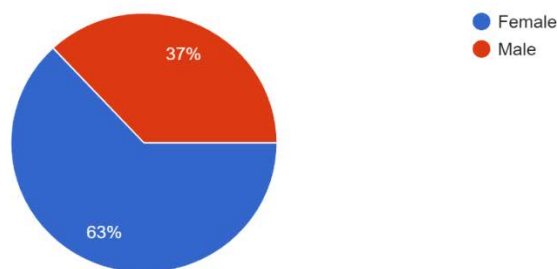


Figure 2 Gender of first-year BSBA students

Table 1 Descriptive results of personal skills

No.	Personal skills	M	SD	SR	VI
1	My teacher integrates communication skills into the lesson	3.15	0.51	Agree	Moderately integrated
2	My teacher integrates decision-making skills into the lesson	3.04	0.46	Agree	Moderately integrated
3	My teacher integrates problem-solving skills into the lesson	3.13	0.58	Agree	Moderately integrated
4	My teacher integrates honesty and integrity skills into the lesson	3.30	0.59	Agree	Moderately integrated
	Overall mean	3.16	0.54	Agree	Moderately integrated

Legend: 1) 1.00-1.49 = not integrated; 2) 1.50-2.49 = slightly integrated; 3) 2.50-3.49 = moderately integrated; 4) 3.50-4.00 = highly integrated; SR = scale response, VI = verbal interpretation

### Personal skills

Personal skills, as perceived by the respondents, are presented in Table 2. The descriptive results based on the overall mean of 3.16 (SD = .54) revealed that students *agree* that teachers *moderately integrated* soft skills into ERL during the COVID-19 pandemic. All the questions asked and answered *agree*, and it is interpreted as moderately integrated. This result implies that teachers were able to integrate personal skills into the lessons even during the sudden change in learning modalities because of the pandemic. According to Kearsley and Shneiderman (1998), engaged learning encompasses all student activities that entail active cognitive processes—such as creation, problem-solving, reasoning, decision-making, and evaluation.

Table 2 Descriptive results of character-building skills

No.	Character-building skills	M	SD	SR	VI
1	My teacher integrates resiliency skills into the lesson	3.06	0.53	Agree	Moderately integrated
2	My teacher integrated career management skills into the lesson	3.15	0.66	Agree	Moderately integrated
3	My teacher integrates network relationship-building skills into the lesson	2.91	0.58	Agree	Moderately integrated
4	My teacher integrates innovation skills into the lesson	2.97	0.61	Agree	Moderately integrated
	Overall mean	3.02	0.60	Agree	Moderately integrated

Legend: 1) 1.00-1.49 = not integrated; 2) 1.50-2.49 = slightly integrated; 3) 2.50-3.49 = moderately integrated; 4) 3.50-4.00 = highly integrated; SR = scale response; VI = verbal interpretation

### Character-building skills

Character-building skills, as perceived by the respondents, are presented in Table 3. The descriptive results based on the overall mean of 3.02 (SD = 0.60) revealed that students *agree* that teachers *moderately integrated* soft skills into ERL during the COVID-19 pandemic. All the questions asked and answered *agree*, and it is interpreted as *moderately integrated*. This result implies that teachers were able to integrate character-building skills into the lessons even during the sudden change of learning modalities because of the pandemic. According to Kearsley and

Shneiderman (1998), engagement theory is founded on the concept of forming successful collaborative teams that work on ambitious projects that are relevant to people outside the classroom. Teachers—but also parents, students, and society—are responsible for influencing children’s character and building students’ character in distance learning. Cooperation is required at all levels (Hodges et al., 2022). Furthermore, Yulianti and Sulistiyawati (2020) highlighted technology as it is used in the development of students’ character through the blended learning mode.

Table 3 Descriptive results of organisational skills

No.	Organisational skills	M	SD	SR	VI
1	My teacher integrates cross-cultural skills into the lesson	2.95	0.51	Agree	Moderately integrated
2	My teacher integrates diversity skills into the lesson	3.02	0.61	Agree	Moderately integrated
3	My teacher integrates coaching and mentoring skills in the lesson	2.89	0.64	Agree	Moderately integrated
	Overall mean	2.95	0.59	Agree	Moderately integrated

Legend: 1) 1.00-1.49 = not integrated; 2) 1.50-2.49 = slightly integrated; 3) 2.50-3.49 = moderately integrated; 4) 3.50-4.00 = highly integrated; SR = scale response; VI = verbal interpretation

#### Organisational skills

Organisational skills, as perceived by the respondents, are presented in Table 4. The descriptive results based on the overall mean of 3.02 (SD = .60) revealed that students *agree* that teachers *moderately integrated* soft skills into ERL during the COVID-19 pandemic. All the questions asked answered *agree*, and it is interpreted as *moderately integrated*. This result implies that teachers were able to integrate character-building skills into the lessons even during the sudden change of learning modalities because of the pandemic. According to Thach and Murphy (1995), organisational skills are one of the technical competencies that teachers in distance education should demonstrate. If integrated into the class, this teaching competency can be acquired by students even in ERL. Furthermore, Oliveira et al. (2021) highlight that, while some platforms support classroom dynamics, teachers and students note a lack of engagement and human interaction. Teachers couldn’t see whether students comprehended the lesson because they kept their cameras turned off most of the time. Small details, such as doubtful facial expressions, which were easily observed in face-to-face lectures, were not seen in this technology-mediated context. This is a disadvantage of ERL because it is difficult to integrate skills into the lessons.

Table 4 The difference in integration of soft skills when grouped by gender

	Variable 1	Variable 2
Mean	3.034118	3.024828
Variance	0.214976	0.260819
Observations	17	29
Hypothesised mean difference	0	
df	36	
t Stat	0.063153	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.474997	
t Critical one-tail	1.688298	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.949994	
t Critical two-tail	2.028094	

#### Gender

The average difference between males and females is not statistically significant because the t-value, which is 0.94, is greater than 0.05. This result implies that there is no difference in perception between male and female students regarding the integration of soft skills by the tertiary school teachers.

Table 5 The difference in integration of soft skills when grouped according to learning modalities

Source of variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between groups	0.155505	2	0.077752	0.295218	0.745977	3.231727
Within groups	10.53491	40	0.263373			
Total	10.69042	42				

#### Learning modalities

The average difference among BSBA students when grouped according to the learning modalities is not significant. The *p-value* of 0.74 > 0.05 implies that there is no statistically significant difference in the perception of students regarding the integration of soft skills in ERL during the pandemic. According to the study of Iglesias-Pradas et al., (2021), organisational factors can contribute to the successful implementation of emergency response learning, which may have a positive impact on students' academic performance. However, the analysis does not find differences across courses with different class sizes or delivery modes.

## Discussion

This paper discusses the integration of soft skills in distance learning as assessed by the learners during ERL during the COVID-19 outbreak. The findings showed that learners' perceived soft skills were moderately integrated during remote learning. The Ministry of Higher Education (2006) discusses the importance of soft skills integration in teaching and learning. Teachers have a major obligation to develop students' soft skills because they are vital for holistic development. Schulz (2008) suggested that educators should integrate and practice the concept of soft skills in class to improve students' skills. Moreover, teachers should be creative to enhance students' soft skills (Shoffner, 2011). According to Ngang et al. (2015), the most effective and efficient way to



learn these skills is by integrating them in the course while learning hard skills during class. Therefore, a significant effect of the teaching and learning process in developing soft skills among students in universities will be realised. However, teachers and students were forced to adapt to the global situation and adjust their learning modes to continue studying in the midst of a pandemic. According to Verde and Valeo (2021), to continue learning, students and teachers had to adapt to the global situation, and change their teaching–learning methodology.

In addition, the result of the study into the integration of soft skills (such as personal skills, character-building skills, and organisational skills) is that students do not perceive ERL to be fully integrated. In relation to engagement theory, the idea of creating successful collaborative teams that are meaningful to someone outside the classroom is summarised by relate–create–donate. This implies that learning activities must (1) occur in a group context, (2) be project-based, and (3) have an outside focus. Although ERL uses technology to conduct classes, some faculty use off-line modules to deliver learning, and this modality does not integrate communication and collaboration among students. The study contributes to the distance learning literature by adding to our understanding of distance learning amid a pandemic through the lenses of engagement theory. It also has practical implications for all active participants in the educational process.

## Conclusion

The academic performance of students depends not only on intellectual ability but also on non-academic aspects such as soft skills. Students' academic success may be influenced by how they participate in all aspects of learning. Soft skills are one of the major components of student success that should be emphasised by their professors or teachers. Even when all higher educational institutions implement ERL because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the integration of soft skills in lessons should not be taken for granted. However, based on the initial assessment conducted on BSBA first-year students, the results showed that somehow the soft skills were being integrated into the lesson. Personal skills, character-building skills, and organisational skills are moderately integrated.

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Miano, L. C. (2022). An initial assessment of soft skills integration in emergency remote learning during COVID-19 pandemic: A learners' perspective. *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, 26(2), [51–61].



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