

## **Fading Fluency: Examining the Decline of Soft Skills in American Education Students Through Quantitative Analysis**

Forrest R. Parker III, Valdosta State University, United States  
J. T. Cox, Valdosta State University, United States

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### **Abstract**

In an era where professional success increasingly depends on interpersonal and adaptive competencies, soft skills are emerging as essential components of effective teacher preparation. This mixed-methods study explores the impact of a targeted undergraduate communication course (EDUC 2000) on the development of soft skills in pre-service teachers at a regional university. Utilizing pre-existing self-efficacy survey data from 59 students, a validated soft skills inventory with 38 recent course completers, observational teaching data from practicum placements, and student reflection narratives, the study reveals statistically significant gains in key areas including instructional communication, classroom engagement, and professional demeanor. Students who completed the course outperformed their peers in rubric-based teaching observations and reported increased confidence in public speaking and instructional clarity. Thematic analysis of reflective narratives further corroborated the positive impact of the course. These findings support a call for embedding structured communication and soft skill instruction into educator preparation programs to foster holistic, career-ready teaching professionals in a post-pandemic educational landscape.

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## Introduction

Soft skills such as communication, adaptability, teamwork, and emotional regulation are essential for successful teaching and learning (Robles, 2012; Zins et al., 2004). These skills not only influence how teachers manage classrooms and interact with students, but also how they collaborate with colleagues, engage parents, and respond to the emotional dynamics of schooling environments (Collie et al., 2012). Despite this, recent research suggests a troubling decline in soft skills among American university students, including those enrolled in teacher preparation programs (Hart Research Associates, 2018; NACE, 2023).

This study investigates the development of soft skills among pre-service teachers enrolled in an undergraduate communication course (EDUC 2000). Through a combination of surveys, a validated soft skills inventory, classroom teaching observations, and reflective student narratives, we explore the extent to which targeted instruction in communication skills supports growth in key soft skill areas.

## Literature Review

### The Importance of Soft Skills in Education

Effective teaching is not solely dependent on pedagogical knowledge; it also requires a strong foundation in interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. Robles (2012) emphasizes that top-rated soft skills in the workforce include integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, professionalism, flexibility, and teamwork. In the context of education, these competencies translate to better classroom climate, improved student relationships, and increased instructional effectiveness (Collie et al., 2012).

### Evidence of Decline

Studies have shown that although employers value soft skills highly, many recent college graduates are underprepared in these areas. According to Hart Research Associates (2018), while 99% of university faculty believe they are preparing students well for the workforce, only 33% of employers agree. Similarly, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2023) reports that communication, leadership, and problem-solving continue to be among the top desired attributes, yet they are consistently areas of deficiency among job applicants.

### Soft Skills and Teacher Preparation

Zins et al. (2004) connect soft skills to social-emotional learning (SEL), suggesting that teacher education must integrate SEL frameworks to adequately prepare candidates. Rosenberg et al. (2012) argue for a triangular design approach in employability training; one that combines technical knowledge, interpersonal skills, and self-regulation. Yet, many educator preparation programs still over-emphasize standards and assessments at the expense of holistic teacher development.

## Methods

This mixed-methods study involved 59 undergraduate education majors enrolled at a regional university. Data were collected through the following phases:

### Self-Efficacy Survey

All 59 students completed a self-efficacy survey assessing their perceived competence in areas such as public speaking, instructional explanation, and classroom communication. These data were compared between students who had completed the EDUC 2000 course and those who had not.

### Soft Skills Inventory

A subset of 38 students who recently completed the EDUC 2000 course were assessed using a validated soft skills inventory aligned with employer expectations and SEL competencies. Skills measured included teamwork, conflict resolution, audience awareness, and adaptability.

### Teaching Observations

Teaching observations were conducted using a standardized rubric during the following semester's practicum. Observers were trained faculty or supervisors who rated each candidate on verbal delivery, audience awareness, student engagement, and adaptability.

### Reflective Narratives

Students completed written reflections at the end of the course and were interviewed after their first practicum. Reflections were coded thematically to identify self-reported growth and perceived impact of the course. Interview notes were used to compare with course reflections.

## Results

### Survey Comparison (n = 59)

Students who took the course reported higher self-perceived competence in all domains:

**Table 1**  
*Self-Perceived Competence*

<b>Skill Area</b>	<b>Course Mean</b>	<b>Non-Course Mean</b>
Explaining instructional concepts	4.42	3.38
Comfort with public speaking	4.05	3.38
Engaging students	4.34	3.50
Adapting communication to different learners	4.47	3.94
Using nonverbal techniques effectively	4.39	3.81
Managing student questions and feedback	4.34	3.63
Feeling prepared during practicum	4.29	3.50
Receiving positive feedback from faculty/peers	4.45	3.75

*Note.* All differences were statistically significant at  $p < .05$  using independent samples  $t$ -tests.

## Soft Skills Inventory (n = 38)

Analysis of the soft skills inventory administered to 38 participants revealed notable strengths and areas for growth among pre-service teachers. The highest-rated competencies were teamwork (M = 4.40), professional demeanor (M = 4.35), and oral communication (M = 4.25), suggesting that students felt confident in their ability to collaborate, maintain appropriate conduct, and communicate effectively in spoken settings. These areas reflect foundational attributes that support classroom presence and collegial relationships.

Conversely, participants reported lower levels of self-efficacy in initiative-taking (M = 3.21), conflict resolution (M = 3.47), and audience awareness (M = 3.50). These results indicate potential challenges in independently anticipating needs, navigating interpersonal challenges, and tailoring communication to diverse learners—skills that are essential for responsive teaching. These gaps align with prior research pointing to deficiencies in adaptive and context-sensitive soft skills among emerging professionals and highlight opportunities for targeted instructional support within teacher education programs.

## Observation Results

Classroom observations conducted during the practicum semester revealed significant performance differences between students who completed the EDUC 2000 communication course and those who did not. Pre-service teachers who took the course consistently demonstrated more effective instructional delivery. Specifically, they were more likely to use varied tone, pacing, and body language to enhance student engagement. These students also showed greater proficiency in engaging learners through questioning, facilitating interaction, and responding clearly to feedback during instruction.

Notably, course completers exhibited a higher degree of adaptability in the classroom, effectively adjusting their communication and instructional strategies in response to student needs and classroom dynamics. Their transitions between lesson segments were smoother and more deliberate, indicating a stronger sense of instructional control and awareness.

Quantitatively, the rubric-based teaching evaluation scores averaged 4.2 for the course group, compared to 3.5 for their peers who had not completed the course. This difference was found to be statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ), affirming the positive instructional impact of structured communication training on classroom teaching performance.

## Student Reflections

Qualitative analysis of student reflections, collected at the end of the course and again during the following semester, revealed strong positive perceptions of the communication course's impact. A recurring theme was **increased confidence in public speaking**, with one student noting, *"I feel much more confident talking in front of groups."* Others emphasized how the course helped sharpen their awareness of audience and tone, with one reflection stating, *"The class helped me think about who I was talking to and how I sounded."* These insights underscore the importance of metacognitive growth in professional communication.

Additionally, several students reported directly applying course concepts in their practicum experiences. One wrote, *"I used what I learned when I taught my practicum lessons, and it made a big difference."* These reflective narratives suggest not only positive emotional

responses to the course but also the **transfer of communication skills into authentic teaching environments**, reinforcing the course's practical value and lasting influence.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The findings of this study strongly suggest that targeted instruction in communication significantly boosts soft skill development in pre-service teachers. Quantitative and observational data demonstrate gains in critical areas of interpersonal competence, and student narratives support these findings. These results align with broader calls for integrating soft skill and SEL instruction into higher education, especially in programs that prepare candidates for highly relational professions like teaching (Collie et al., 2012; Zins et al., 2004).

Given the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing erosion of face-to-face communication opportunities, embedding intentional instruction on professional interactions is now more critical than ever.

### **Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process**

This manuscript is the result of original research conducted by the authors, including the design of the study, data collection, and analysis. The literature review was compiled using peer-reviewed journal articles accessed through our university's academic library system. All statistical analyses and interpretation of findings were carried out by the research team.

After a complete draft of the manuscript was written by the authors, generative artificial intelligence tools (specifically, OpenAI's ChatGPT) were used to assist in refining the clarity, structure, and coherence of certain narrative sections, such as the literature review and results summaries. These AI-generated edits were carefully reviewed and revised by the authors to ensure accuracy, originality, and alignment with scholarly standards.

At no point did AI tools generate original data, formulate research questions, conduct analysis, or make interpretive claims. Final authorship decisions and all intellectual contributions were human-led.

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