JOB INTERVIEW SIMULATION - DEVELOPING ESP STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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Abstract. *It is common knowledge that a CV or a résumé reflects an applicant's education, skills, relevant experience and volunteer work. It could make a good impression or a bad one as it does not reflect that person's genuine enthusiasm, positive attitude, talent or other qualities that might be highly sought by employers. If it catches the eye of recruiters, the next step is getting an interview invite. Attending an in-person interview could be a dreadful experience for undergraduates seeking employment or even for new graduates since most of them are familiar neither with the requirements of the labour market nor with the eligibility criteria. Moreover, since communication skills have been held in high regard in today's business environment, students should learn how to develop these skills in order to better "sell" their abilities and thus to improve their chances of success. The present paper is part of a broader project on oral presentations which will materialize in a course book designed for ESP students in general and for Business English students in particular. It basically aims at improving their communication skills, on the one hand, and at increasing their self-confidence, on the other. The section presented in this paper intends to develop ESP students' communication skills by involving them in a job interview simulation activity. Its main purpose is to familiarize students with the main steps (collecting job-related data, understanding job description and job specifications, supporting documentation, how to research the companies they wish to get employed at, etc.), the special requirements of a job interview (including proper job interview etiquette) and the basics of negotiation tactics in order to be better prepared and to make a good impression on a real employment interview.*

Keywords: *communication skills, public speaking skills, oral presentations, ESP*

Introduction

Both the ever-evolving technologies and economic globalization have led to significant changes in the social and economic structures. Information and communication technologies have had a great impact on developing economies worldwide. Consequently, the employment practices have also changed. In today's work environment practical skills such as analytical thinking, coding, programming or data analysis are in high demand. Additionally, employers place a greater emphasis on communication abilities in addition to interpersonal skills, creative thinking, team-working, flexibility and adaptability or problem-solving abilities. It is obvious that macroeconomic developments will shape the future skills demand. But despite economic conditions the demand for well-prepared candidates with an impressive skill-set is still high. Research shows (Felstead, Gallie, Green, Inanc 71) that the generic skills that have been held in high regard in recent years are computing skills and influence skills, which basically encompass communicative, persuading, analyzing and negotiating skills.

Universities are currently facing new challenges of the labour market. In order to better understand the labour market demands for skills and employers' expectations, universities should foster open dialogue and mutually beneficial relationships with the stakeholders, both public and private. This aspect will hopefully enable them to forecast employment trends and assess labour market challenges as well as employment opportunities.

Therefore, the higher education institutions must take into account the present and future social needs and must strive to continuously adapt to the new labour market context to produce better-prepared graduates. They also need to consider their undergraduates' long-term goals. In order to do so, they are expected to make strenuous efforts to provide

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undergraduates with the right training for the jobs of the future, which focuses more on acquiring special skills in addition to constructing knowledge. In this respect, Fallows and Steven emphasized that:

> today's challenging economic situation means that it is no longer sufficient for a new graduate to have knowledge of an academic subject; increasingly it is necessary for students to gain those skills which will enhance their prospects of employment. Employability skills include the following abilities: the retrieval and handling of information; communication and presentation; planning and problem solving; and social development and interaction. (Fallows, Steven 92)

Moreover, the dynamics of the information-dissemination process together with the openness of higher education institutions towards internationalization have highly influenced their activities which have been correlated with the interests of the local community, business and social environment. Therefore, in recent years, in the Romanian academic environment a great emphasis has been laid on training undergraduates to be able to better compete on the labour market.

Due to the increasingly tougher competition on today's labour market, employers want and seek candidates who are qualified, more experienced and better-prepared with additional soft and hard skills. They are in constant search for those applicants who have been actively involved in extracurricular activities or community service and who have done relevant volunteer work or internships. Under these circumstances, it is of the utmost importance to prepare students for the constantly-changing demands of the labour market in order to meet future challenges. Therefore, proper training can facilitate their adaptation to these demands and thus increase their chances of landing a job.

English has acquired the status of the language for international communication and has become the official language of trading relationships, politics, diplomacy, tourism, aviation, science and technology. Since English facilitated international communication, it has become the official language of international academic conferences, congresses, thus it has acquired the status and prestige of the main international academic language (Albach 87).

Since Romania joined the European Union in 2007 and Europe opened its borders, an increasingly higher number of graduates and undergraduates have been interested in learning English in search of better-paid jobs in other countries or education opportunities. Other reasons for acquiring fluency in English are the work abroad programs in the United States of America or taking part in Erasmus exchange programmes that enable undergraduates to travel and work in Europe.

Teaching English as a second language has also evolved in the context of globalization. It has undergone methodological modernization of the teaching process in order to adapt to these requirements. Emerging as a branch of studying English as a foreign language, English for specific purposes (ESP), as Hyland (in Cummings, Davison 340) emphasized,

> has consistently been at the cutting-edge of both theory development and innovative practice in applied linguistics, making a significant contribution to our understanding of the varies ways language is used in particular communities.

Although linguists argue that there is not a clear-cut distinction between general English (GE) and ESP, both aiming at learning and communicating efficiently, Hutchinson and Waters (Hutchinson, Waters 53) pointed out that the difference between the two can be summarized as follows: "in theory nothing, in practice a great deal". ESP has developed

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significantly over the years and has become an individual academic discipline. Furthermore, it has acquired the status of an umbrella term and has turned into a major force in English language teaching and research. ESP students are familiar with basic grammar rules and vocabulary. They are highly motivated to acquire the technical and semi-technical vocabulary being aware that mastering English for specific purposes may increase their chances of employment (or promotion).

The ESP teacher is thus expected to create a motivating syllabus based on the real needs of the learners as the material facilitates the learners' linguistic efficiency in this particular domain. It is worth noting that the main difference between GE and ESP lies not only in the specialized vocabulary, specific grammatical structures, selection of texts for listening and reading, but also in specific skills such as oral presentation, academic speaking or report writing.

At university level, in Romania the study of modern foreign languages (English, French or German) is a compulsory subject in the state education system. It is studied in the first academic year (usually for two semesters) regardless of the domain or the specialization attended. The students enrolled in the undergraduate degree programs offered by the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați, have to choose between two foreign languages included in the present curriculum: English or French and study it for the first two semesters. However, the students of International Relations study English for six semesters. They start with learning the basic vocabulary of Business English in the first year, followed by English for Business Communication in the second year and in the third year they delve into English for Business Correspondence. By the time they graduate they are expected to attain the B2 or C1 level of proficiency. At this level, the ESP teacher can focus on developing special skills such as presentation skills, communication skills, public speaking skills or negotiating skills. The soon-to-be graduates will definitely rely on these skills in their future academic endeavours (presenting a paper in a conference, a dissertation, defending a PhD thesis or presenting themselves in a job interview).

The Role of the ESP Teacher

Non-native ESP students, regardless of their field of specialization, are nowadays increasingly more interested in developing their communication skills and acquiring a good command of English grammar in addition to learning the specialized vocabulary and communicative functions of language. Out of the seven theories of students' motivation to learn outlined by Seifert & Sutton, the present paper draws on students' motives as goals set for themselves and as interests, devoting more attention to certain aspects, such as improving their communication skills (Seifert, Sutton 109). The increasing demand for English courses designed for groups of learners with specific needs has been justified by the fact that language varies significantly from one specialized context to another. Non-native students of English need to be taught how to deal with this flux of information in order to develop their abilities required for effective communication in occupational settings. ESP teachers have a more difficult task as their students are familiar with or even advanced in English (basic grammar rules and vocabulary) and they need to focus not only on acquiring the specialized vocabulary and specific grammatical features but also on practicing certain skills which are required in a work setting.

According to Howard & Brown, Ferguson is credited with distinguishing between specialist knowledge and specialized knowledge, thus distinguishing between the students' background knowledge of a particular field and the teacher's knowledge (Howard, Brown 4). As Flowerdew & Costley mentioned, he also pointed out that ESP course developers/teachers

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> may not need 'specialist knowledge' (knowledge of disciplinary subject content) but arguably they do need 'specialized knowledge' in terms of knowledge of disciplinary cultures and values, knowledge of the epistemological basis of different disciplines and knowledge of genre and discourse-analytic skills (Flowerdew, Costley 77).

Helen Basturkmen mentioned the ESP teacher's range of tasks, which require additional skills and knowledge and which start from investigating the learners' needs in order to develop courses and materials (Basturkmen 48). It is not perhaps devoid of interest to mention Anita Woolfolk's point of view who tackled the multifaceted role of a teacher in the teaching process as organizer, guide, resource person, evaluator and counsellor (Woolfolk 36). Flowerdew & Costley draw attention to the fact that the ESP teachers are expected to adopt "many other possible roles" in addition to planning, developing, teaching ESP courses and assessing students (Flowerdew, Costley 79).

Consequently, ESP teachers must focus on the students' specific communicative needs when planning their materials but they should also take into account certain psychological implications. The position I am advocating here is that, in addition to sound professional knowledge and expertise (terminology and even jargon), ESP teachers must fill a wide range of roles, sometimes simultaneously. Thus, based on their students' cognitive resources and considering their inner motivational resources, ESP teachers must devote special attention to their immediate and long-term goals (seeking employment/attending a job interview). Furthermore, besides being role-models for their students, ESP teachers must be able to recognize their students' potential, encourage them and help them cope with negative emotions. In addition, their courses need to be relevant to their teaching context and to develop their productive skills. Therefore, ESP teachers are expected to select proper topics, which are indisputably connected to the real world of work and which, on the one hand, meet students' needs and help them acquire and improve the technical and semi-technical vocabulary as well critical skills needed when entering the workforce, on the other. Taking into account the heterogeneity of ESP students, they should adjust the material to the changing needs of the labour market and tailor the language so that all their students can be full participants. However, the most challenging task, as Jones put it, is that

> ESP teachers find themselves in a situation where they are expected to produce a course that exactly matches the needs of a group of learners, but are expected to do so with no, or very limited, preparation time (Jones 91).

An effective ESP course is a complex, dynamic and interactive process that should be based on the data provided by a needs analysis. The learning-centred approach promoted by Hutchinson and Waters, emphasizes that the effectiveness of the learning process can be enriched by the use of other skills, aiming at maximizing the potential of the learning situation (Hutchinson, Waters 75). The use of English as an international means of communication within the business world has led to an increasing interest in learning ESP grammar and vocabulary in order to drive the learners' career forward. Therefore, the focus of syllabus construction in language teaching for ESP students should be on identifying their needs and taking into account the requirements of the labour market.

Last but not least, ESP teachers must have a direct contact with the work environment, i.e. direct links with employers or representatives of the public and private sector (government-owned companies, multinational companies, small and medium-sized enterprises, etc.) or at least to be familiar with labour market expectations in order to find out which employability skills to have in mind when selecting their materials and which to

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develop and assess. Also alumni working in multinational companies can be invited to share their career experiences with students. It is worth mentioning here that improving collaboration with the Department of Counselling and Career Guidance that exists in every higher education institution can be beneficial and is highly recommended as it would enable the ESP teacher to provide effective career counselling, help students improve their CVs as well as cover letters, make good suggestions on their verbal and non-verbal communication thus building individual confidence.

To conclude, an ESP teacher plays a crucial role by making students aware of their employability skills and personal attributes, enhancing their capacity to respond well under pressure and develop their creativity and spontaneity. By developing good communication skills before they leave education and enter the employment market, the ESP teacher virtually ensures a successful transition from the study environment to the work environment.

Job Interview Simulation

The present paper is based on an experiment that combined integrative learning with operational learning and which involved my 3rd year students of International Relations who were instructed to prepare a 10 minute interview presentation. In an attempt to adjust the contents of the teaching – learning – assessment process to serve my students' real needs, I devised certain knowledge-acquiring activities that tackle relevant communication tasks that meant to prepare my students to cope with real-life challenges better and thus improve their employment prospects. The material was adapted to their needs and introduced

Starting from *the hierarchy of needs* developed by Abraham Maslow, an American psychologist, students became familiar with the five basic needs humans are motivated to satisfy. It can be a powerful tool for managers to better understand human motivation and to explain and predict work behaviour. Abraham Maslow arranged them in a pyramid that starts with the lowest level of needs that people seek to satisfy i.e. food, water, warmth, rest, followed by safety needs (security and safety). At the next level, people need to satisfy the psychological needs, which are belongingness and love needs, followed by esteem needs relating to prestige and feeling of accomplishment. The pyramid culminates with self-actualization, which means achieving a person's full potential.

Furthermore, the teaching material introduces the theory of Professor Albert Mehrabian, who understood the importance of non-verbal communication and developed *the 3 Vs of communication theory*. He emphasized that only 7% of our communication is verbal (i.e. the selection of words), 38% is vocal (tone of voice) and 55% is visual (eye-contact, gestures, posture and body language). An entire seminar was devoted to discussing the impact of communication in an oral presentation, introducing the basic concepts and the main stages of an interview presentation. The take-home message was that in any oral presentation being assertive is more about the body language than the selection of words.

The next step was to select the type of interview. There are several types of interviews as well as interview methods and techniques but out of the five types identified by Ludlow & Panton the present material focused on planning the presentations that is usually expected to be delivered in the selection interview (also called the screening interview) which can be conducted in-person or on the phone (Ludlow, Panton 92). This is the traditional one-on-one interview and if successfully passed, it leads to the interviewing process, i.e. the panel or board interview (or the second interview). The panel interview is more frightening since it involves more interviewers (two to five people, staff members, executives, co-workers) interested in finding out whether the applicant is eligible or not. However, regardless of the type of interview (face-to-face interview, phone interview, lunch interview, panel interview, online interview conducted via video, etc.) the applicant is usually asked to deliver a 10-

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minute presentation about herself/himself focusing on the relevant employability skills, academic background, work experience (if any), relevant volunteer work and job knowledge. Some employers choose to screen their candidates through various tests. One of them is the competency-based application interview or form, which aims at identifying the candidate's specific skills, knowledge, experience and attitudes. In order to find out more about a potential employee, the employer may also ask for concrete examples.

Due to the steep competition that exists today, employers are increasingly looking for applicants who are not only excellent communicators, goal-oriented, good listeners and willing to work in a team structure. Their expectations are increasingly higher when it comes to work experience, skills and qualifications a potential employee must have.

It is worth noting here that under these circumstances undergraduates should be prepared to adapt to the changing labour market. They should learn how to communicate efficiently especially in stressful competitive situations. Based on Kolb's model of experiential learning (apud Castle, Buckler 79) who advocates the importance of experience (learning by doing) in the educational process and drawing on a famous saying ascribed to Confucius "I hear, I forget, I see, I remember, I do, I understand", I thought about simulating a job interview and thus challenging my students with real situations and questions.

Before writing their presentation the students were instructed to make a list of subjects/activities they were good at (strengths), bad at (weaknesses) and keen on. Additionally, they were asked to select only one word to describe their personality and to identify their major flaw. They were advised to avoid overused words and phrases such as *dedicated, sociable* or *hard-working* but to select some suitable powerful adjectives such as *reliable, resilient, diligent, goal-oriented, results-driven, highly-organized, people-person, excellent communicator,* etc.

Concerning their flaws, they were recommended to think about something that can be easily turned into a positive attribute such as being *introverted* for example. According to psychologists (Abrams, 17) introverts are more reserved but not necessarily shy and they pay more attention to details. Research shows that they face challenges better. This self-review process determined my ESP students to analyse and determine their actual competences, strengths and weaknesses. In this respect they need to be made aware of their employability skills and thus to enhance their self-esteem. Other examples of flaws that can be easily turned into strengths are: being punctual and expecting others to be the same, indecisive, bad at prioritizing and delegating tasks or even the lack of experience for undergraduates. Sharing a weakness that needs improving means that the candidate is aware of it and that he or she would like to make an effort to overcome it such as the fear of speaking in public, for instance, as not all people have great public speaking skills and statistical studies show that there are even numerous cases of glossophobia (speech anxiety).

It is worth noting here that the teaching material also includes details about the negotiating strategies as negotiating the salary and specific compensation package, for example, can be a challenge to anyone but especially to graduates who are in the early stages of their careers. Since negotiation may be used in any interpersonal interaction it is better to prepare students to recognize the negotiation strategies, to use the specialized vocabulary and to practice. If students find out more about the main negotiation strategies (i.e. competitive, collaborative, compromising, conflict-avoidance and the accommodating strategy) and specialized vocabulary, they could use this information for negotiating a contract or apply it in the job negotiation context.

Students must always bear in mind that the first impression is the most important in a job interview as experienced interviewers can "read" the candidate's body language based on the way they enter the room and greet the audience. Specialists point out that the first 4 to 25

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seconds are the most important and unfortunately a candidate will never get a second chance to make a first impression. (Pham, Miyake 89)

Based on the previously acquired concepts and information, we organized a job interview where each student was expected to prepare and deliver an interview presentation and to present supporting documentation (an updated CV, a cover letter and a letter of recommendation). The jobs they applied for were job openings advertised by real companies selected on the internet so that they were be able to collect job-related data, to understand the job description and the job specifications. Each presentation was objectively assessed and graded by the other students who had been given evaluation forms which listed the major points that were taken into account:

1. greetings and hand shake
2. introduction
3. clarity of presentation
4. assertiveness
5. concluding remarks
6. relevance of the selected information
7. body language and eye contact
8. use of visual aids
9. dealing with questions
10. dealing with spontaneous digressions

Being aware that the employment practices have changed in recent years and that a greater emphasis is placed nowadays on practical skills rather than on theory learning, my students responded enthusiastically to this assignment and were willing to exercise their communicative skills in a relevant context. Some of them had attended job interviews previously and were eager to share their experience with us, providing valuable information as well as real-life interviewing situations, such as:

- Situation 1. You work as a mobile phone sales representative in a famous company. Two people arrive at your desk at the same time and: one is a loyal customer who wants to extend the contract with your company and the other one is a person interested in signing a contract with your company, i.e. a prospective customer. There is nobody in the office to help you. Which one would you deal with first and why?
- Situation 2. You work for a firm providing a wide range of office stationary. Can you think of 25 ways to use a pen other than writing?

Specialists say that in such cases there are not right or wrong answers but there could be different answers. The interviewers are looking for an immediate answer especially to an unexpected question to prove the candidate's ability to stay calm in stressful situations. Therefore, constructive comments were highly encouraged in an attempt to improve their performance in a real-life job interview.

The list of questions used in this activity was compiled after consulting several hiring committees and hiring managers from the Romanian business environment who were willing to share their interview techniques with us. The interviewers may ask several open questions in the hiring process which can range from the most common *Why should we hire you?* to unusual *What annoys you the most about your colleagues*? or even awkward *Would you prefer to be an eagle or a penguin*?. The answer a candidate provides can really make the

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difference. However a prompt and original answer is better than no answer at all. By asking unusual questions the interviewers are more interested in the way candidates think and react. Thus, they can assess the candidate's analytical thinking, decision-making skills, maturity level and willingness to accept responsibility. Furthermore, they can also gauge the candidate's speed of reaction, resourcefulness, and even creativity and sense of humour.

Findings

My students showed great interest in the topic and admitted that presenting in a supportive atmosphere was very helpful. They were also encouraged by their colleagues' positive feedback. Due to learning effectively by doing and learning from real-life experiences shared by others, by the end of this activity my students were able to:

- use language efficiently in order to demonstrate their communication skills
- know proper job interview etiquette
- select the relevant information to speak about themselves
- be able to fully and openly discuss about their skills and abilities
- manage their emotions in high-stress situations
- be assertive and take initiative
- be aware of their body-language (posture, shoulders, hands)
- be emphatic in order to understand others
- be willing to negotiate (recognize strategies and techniques of negotiations)
- demonstrate their ability to stay calm and focused
- make decisions and react well under pressure
- be able to listen and anticipate questions
- objectively assess each other's presentation
- respond better to hypothetical situations
- prove that they were organized.

It is not perhaps devoid of interest to mention one of the most important things they learned was that the essence of an effective presentation is the attitude and the power of sincere smiling. They also understood how important is to be spontaneous when handling interviewers' questions, who rarely ask closed questions. Moreover, they displayed flexibility in relation to their colleagues, responded positively to constructive comments and were willing to give and receive feedback. Through learning by doing, they realized that demonstrating good communication skills could be a competitive advantage in a job interview.

Due to this activity they became more aware that they need a wide diversity of competences (soft skills and hard skills) and resources to be competitive in any work situation. They also became self-aware of their personal attributes that may enhance their employability skills such as honesty, integrity, reliability or even a good sense of humour. To conclude, ESP students' communication skills can be significantly improved during the simulation of a job interview and thus they will be better equipped to face the real-life challenges and to meet employers' requirements in terms of their skills, abilities and attitudes.

Of particular interest is that my students admitted it was a motivating experience and a better way to construct knowledge, thus displaying a more positive attitude towards learning.

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Conclusions

The paper aimed at demonstrating that integrating some student-skill-focused activities and thus familiarizing ESP students with the main stages and basic requirements of a job interview can be very useful when they enter the labour market.

The experiment showed that learning to successfully cope with stress increased their level of confidence. It allowed students to practice their presentation skills and obviously, the more they practice, the greater their level of confidence. The basic aim of this job-interview simulation was to help my ESP students develop a problem-solving attitude instead of a passive or indifferent attitude especially to challenging questions. Moreover, it also aimed at developing their communication skills, creativity and innovation, encouraging teamwork and testing their spontaneity and ability to handle stressful or unexpected situations.

Becoming familiar with different negotiation strategies and tactics may improve students' performance in subsequent real-life negotiation. Consequently, the students who have acquired these marketable international competencies and who constantly strive to develop themselves are more confident that they will meet the requirements of the labour market. They understood that the acquisition of related knowledge, skills and attitudes may give them a powerful advantage in a more competitive labour market with a limited number of well-paid jobs and how important is to be able to perform well when presenting themselves to employers in applications and interviews.

Indisputably, a dynamic presentation with a clear structure (strong opening, the body of presentation and the concluding remarks) may boost an applicant's self-esteem and enhance his/her chances of success.

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