AUTHENTIC LEARNING: JOB INTERVIEW SIMULATION

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Abstract: The article focuses on the job interview simulations made during the seminar "English for Professional Communication", with the aim of checking whether the task meets the requirements of the "authentic learning model", so much sought-after in current teaching environments. It looks into the "authentic learning matrix" and it presents a job interview simulation protocol I use in the seminar, with a view to discussing ways of improving it in order to make it more relevant for the real-world context.

Keywords: authentic learning, job interview simulations, English for Professional Communication

I. Introduction

The "English for Professional Communication" seminar aims to provide students with awareness of the world of work, in terms of possible types of professional contexts and relationships in which newly graduates may find themselves once they have left the academic environment and started their professional life. Topics such as intercultural communication, work routine, elements of the employment file, networking, leadership, or presentation skills are approached through theoretical input, specific language input, case studies and problem-solving assignments. The job interview simulation is one of the most important tasks tackled during the seminar; it rounds off the preparation for the employment process with the most complex stage of all, that time when candidates have to talk interviewers into entrusting them with a job. Interviews in the real world will differ from context to context and no theoretical underpinning of any book on the psychology of interviews can match the actual dynamics of such a real-life encounter; nevertheless, familiarization with standard interviewing protocols and participation in a mock interview will endow students with a feeling of empowerment and confidence and, hopefully, with the sophistication of capitalizing on their best asset, namely youth, and of compensating for their biggest disadvantage, namely inexperience. This article

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aims at checking the authenticity of the task against the "authentic learning matrix model" put forth by specialized literature and to give a description of the task I assign to my 2nd year students in the Polytechnic University of Bucharest.

II. The Authentic Learning Model

The need for authentic learning has been acknowledged in the academic environment for many years now. Providing students with the skills and the knowledge that will enable them to survive and thrive in the real world is the commonsensical objective to have in mind, and still this does not happen as often as it should in the classroom, simply because creating real-life contexts in the academic setting is not easy, nor is it always possible, despite all best intentions. The authentic learning model proposed by specialized literature is quite complex and nuanced, and classroom and curriculum realities do not always cater for its proper implementation. However, awareness that knowledge should be taken out of its ivory tower and made usable in really practical terms is on the rise and great efforts have been made to find ways to match the map with the territory.

For the purpose of this paper I will dwell on the model put forth by Jan Herrington, who identifies nine elements of authentic learning to be found in various studies across specialized literature. Thus, she contends that authentic learning environments:

- "Provide authentic contexts that reflect the way the knowledge will be used in real life
- Provide authentic tasks and activities
- Provide access to expert performances and the modelling of processes
- Provide multiple roles and perspectives
- Support collaborative construction of knowledge
- .Promote reflection to enable abstractions to be formed
- Promote articulation to enable tacit knowledge to be made explicit
- Provide coaching and scaffolding by the teacher at critical times
- Provide for authentic assessment of learning within the tasks" (Herrington, 2000).

Each of these elements will be discussed in relationship with the job interview simulation, a role-play task which, due to its very nature, strives to capture the dynamics of the real-life situation through its direct relevance to the world of work. Before dwelling on the question of the authenticity of the task, I will proceed to its description as such, as assigned to second year students in the Polytechnic University of Bucharest as part of their mid-term examination for the second semester of English for Professional Communication.

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III. The Task: Job Interview Simulation

The task consists in two parts. The first one is homework and has three elements. Students are asked to write their CV and cover letter, following the guidelines discussed in class. They are given the freedom to use whatever template they want, as long as they observe the requirement that "any professional written text should be reader-friendly". They should be able to give arguments for their choice. The job advertisement is either provided by the teacher, or created by themselves, and it has direct relevance to their field of studies; the job vacancy entails an entry-level position, in order to make things easier, but with a minimum of experience, to make things more difficult. The third element of the first part of the task consists in giving short written answers to the following four questions: 1) What will you work for? 2) Will you consider your work a job, a career, or a vocation? 3) When will you consider yourself a successful professional ? 4) What role will communication play in your future work ? These questions are to be found under different forms on the list of the most FAQ in interviews and they tackle the students' inner world rather than pragmatic details such as technical experience, education or expertise. They are short, elemental exercises of personal development, in which students get to have a glimpse into their own expectations and standards. In their cover letter, written answers and interview, students should be able to make proof of the complex, formal vocabulary related to the world of work studied via various exercises prior to the assignment of the task.

The second part of the task consists in the actual interview simulation. Students have to work in groups of four, two interviewers and two interviewees. The two interviewees will take turns to answer the two interviewers who have to work together to prepare the task, and, thus, a natural flow of discussion between three participants is expected to take place. The students are allowed to choose their role and their team members, with the assurance from the teacher that grading will not be necessarily influenced by their ability to be interviewers or interviews; the grade will rather reflect their ability to speak fluent, formal English and to show engagement with the task, and the awareness that interviews are instances of life which require a certain degree of formality, preparation and compliance with certain rules. Prior to the beginning of the interview, the interviewers have to present the profile of the ideal candidate and the job description. They are also expected to complete a rating sheet during the interview and to give feedback at the end, using the "sandwich technique": good points,

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constructive criticism, and again good points. Feedback should be related to a wide range of items from body language to technical expertise. They are free to choose the questions they will ask, but a fair amount of behavioural and technical questions should be used. The principle underlying the preparation for the interview, as well as the writing of the CV and cover letter is the "matching and mirroring" principle, which emphasizes the need to look at the employment process from the perspective of the employer rather than that of the individual trying to get a job, in an attempt at identifying what the recruiting officer is looking for in a candidate. Another principle to be observed throughout the entire activity is cultivation of a "you attitude" rather that of a "me attitude", with the understanding that acknowledgement of the other party, with their needs and vantage point is more likely to lead to a win-win situation.

The question of nervousness is also addressed at the end of the interview, or rather the way in which one manages (or not) to overcome the feeling of inadequacy that interviewees are likely to be seized by, and the feeling of awkwardness interviewers may have to deal with. Both interviewers are asked about how they felt during the interview, as a conclusion to the discussions about building confidence held in previous seminars, in which teacher and students alike tried to draw up a list of tips to relieve nervousness, tips to be used in other life circumstances as well.

In the next section, the principles of the "authentic learning model" put forth by Herrington will be described briefly and discussed with respect to the task at hand.

III. Job Interview Simulation: An Authentic Task

In order for a context to be considered "authentic", it should mirror a real life situation as much possible, including the physical environment, and the complexity of the situation. This mirroring is needed for familiarization with the setting, the standard protocols and the possible obstacles to be encountered. In addition, "the context needs to be all embracing, to provide the purpose and motivation for learning, and provide a sustained and complex learning environment that can be explored at length" (Herrington& Kervin 2007). In other words, if the context has relevance to the real world, it is more likely to be engaging and ultimately useful for the student. Through its very nature, the job interview simulation has huge relevance to the real world and, in order to make it as authentic as possible, it needs to take into consideration all the minor details in a real interview, from a certain dress code to be observed by the participants to the degree of formality of their behavior.

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Another characteristic of authentic tasks is the fact that "they are ill-defined" (Herrington 2000), which means that the students themselves need to divide the task into sub-tasks and to identify the steps required to solve the task. The reasoning behind this principle is that "authentic learning exercises expose the messiness of real-life decision-making, where there may not be a right and wrong answer per se, although a solution may be better or worse than other, depending on the particular context. Such a nuanced understanding involves considerable reflective judgment, valuable lifelong skills, that goes well beyond the memorization of content" (Briggs in Lombardi, 2007). This goes hand in hand with another principle listed by Herrington, the one which states that an authentic learning environment provides coaching, scaffolding, and fading of the teacher support. Thus, students are given the opportunity to run off with their own ideas to overcome uncertainty and ambiguity and to capitalize on their resourcefulness. While the interview simulation is a well-structured task, which needs to be described quite thoroughly by the teacher, in order to make it resemble the real world as closely as possible, the students are given a lot of freedom when it comes to creating the actual scenario and to dealing with the roles they have chosen the way they see fit. The teacher hardly ever intervenes in the discussion taking place and some discreet feedback is given at the end, the feedback that matters most is the one that the participants give to one another.

Interview simulations obviously "support collaborative construction of knowledge", given the fact that students have to work in groups and make concerted efforts to reach a common goal, that of finding the best way of fitting a job description. They also "provide multiples roles and perspectives", since students have to step into somebody else's shoes and assume a new persona. Feedback is an essential way of providing the participants with an idea about how they come across to other people, therefore it is enriching and illuminating.

On the occasion of the preparation for their interview simulation, students also have "access to expert performances" in various ways. The discussion about the interview situation starts with an invitation from the teacher to share experiences with interviews. Although students who have participated in real-life interviews are by no means experts, they provide interesting stories whose main advantage is they are told by a peer, rather than a figure of authority, a peer with extra knowledge. Their experience provides the other students with the confidence that interviews are instances of life which they themselves can handle, and, if the case, they can regard possible failures as useful feedback rather than negative experience. Students are also invited to read at least one article on the psychology of interviews and to

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present some of the tips put forth by experts in interviewing in their field of work. Whenever possible, older students who had already been working for several years were invited by the teacher to express views and give pieces of advice on the interview and the world of work in general.

The job interview simulation also provides opportunity for "reflection" and also "articulation to enable tacit knowledge to be made explicit" given the fact that in the seminars prior to the simulation and at the beginning and at the end of the interview students have to reflect and speak about the preparation for the interview, to give feedback and to express their feelings about the role they were made to assume. Students are given the opportunity to defend their point of view, to provide arguments for their choice of a certain answer to a certain question from the list of the most FAQs and to compare thoughts to their teacher and their peers.

Finally, the interview simulation does indeed provide "authentic assessment of learning within the task" itself; the interview is the final stage of a more complex process of self-reflection, which starts with the task of sketching one's life under the form of a CV and progresses towards the challenging task of highlighting the most relevant aspects of one's personality and achievements in a face-to-face conversation with a prospective employer. Students have the opportunity to witness their own progress as they go through stages of familiarization with the experience of participating in an interview. The final stage of the employment process is acted out by peers who come with their own fresh, albeit inexperienced perspective on the performance of colleagues and who are free to choose their criteria for the rating sheet. Thus, "alignment among task, assessment and policies effectively frees the teacher from a judgemental, teacher-driven role to one where realistic criteria can be used to assess real products. In so doing, students become better prepared for their future experiences as effective professional practitioners" (Herrington 2006).

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IV. Conclusion

Given all of the above, it can be argued that, due to its complexity and relevance for the real world, the job interview simulation is a genuine example of an authentic task that has visible results in terms of raising awareness of the particular real-life situation it is trying to mirror. Moreover, the skills gained through this role play task (tolerance to uncertainty, ability to assume and understand the philosophy underlying a variety of roles, the ability to promote

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oneself, the ability to assess others etc.) can be easily transferred to other life situations, which makes the task even more intrinsically valuable.

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