IMPROVING STUDENTS' EMPLOYABILITY CHANCES - FOREIGN LANGUAGE TRAINERS' ROLE

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Abstract:
This article discusses the need for educators in business schools to become more involved in discovering and cultivating not only hard skills, but also soft skills, in order to prepare students to meet the requirements of their potential employers. At the level of business undergraduate studies in Romania, educational activities focusing on soft skills (such as intercultural communication, positive attitude, flexibility) become essential for increasing students' employability chances.

Foreign language teachers who use a communicative teaching method are specifically involved in such activities. But do these courses cover the entire range of top soft skills required by business executives? What is done in the classroom and what can be improved?
The present study will attempt to find the answers to these questions and to formulate suggestions for a more focused approach to soft skills development through foreign language courses.

Keywords:
Employability, soft skills, intercultural communication.

1. Introduction

Although we live in an information age which praises technical abilities, it has become apparent that these skills are proving insufficient to ensure young people's employability after graduation. According to a recent study conducted in the USA[1], employers are no longer interested only in the new employees' hard skills, but in their aptitudes to communicate efficiently in multicultural contexts, in their positive attitude or their flexible mindset. In other words, business executives are looking for future employees with strong soft skills.

Since foreign language trainers are generally making use of a communicative approach to teaching, this article will investigate their possible role in students' development of soft skills such as interpersonal communication, professionalism or work ethic.

In 2011, Culpin and Scott stated that we are witnessing a passage

[1] Marcel M. ROBLES, 2012, "Executive Perceptions of the Top 10 Soft Skills Needed in Today's Workplace" in *Business Communication Quarterly* 75, pp. 453-465.

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"from the traditional lecture-based 'delivery' of information towards a more student-focused approach, with the student 'experiencing' the learning through dialogue with the self and with the facilitator rather than 'receiving' the information transmitted by the expert"[2].

Classroom interaction, teaching as well as learning processes have changed, therefore, in recent years, trainers' involvement in the formation of students with the purpose of ensuring better employability has become a prerequisite. More active teaching methods (such as simulations, action learning, internships) keep both trainers and students connected to real-life situations. This approach to teaching tends to transfer not only hard skills, but also soft skills. In Laker and Powell's viewpoint hard skills could be summed up as *"technical skills that involve working with equipment, data, software"*, whereas soft skills stand for *"intrapersonal skills such as one's ability to manage oneself and how one handles one's interaction with others"*[3].

As previously mentioned, nowadays foreign language professionals engage in a contextualized approach to teaching in an attempt to enhance certain abilities which (unfortunately) are not given enough attention in other subjects. As early as 2005, J. K. Wellington was voicing his opinion concerning the fact that university curricula in the USA should be adjusted so that *"students learn the importance of soft skills early in their academic programs before they embark on a business career*[4]. Nevertheless, formal education is generally still under the sign of the traditional lecture-based teaching.

This latter approach has become obsolete especially in the context of *"the shift from an industrial economy to an information society and an office economy"*[5] which requires new employees to exhibit a wide range of soft skills.

2. Essential Soft Skills for Better Employability

In 2012, Marcel M. Robles published "Executive Perceptions of the Top 10 Soft Skills Needed in Today's Workplace", a study based on interviews conducted

[2] Victoria CULPIN and Scott Hamish, 2011, "The effectiveness of a live case study approach: Increasing knowledge and understanding of 'hard' versus 'soft' skills in executive education" in *Management Learning* 2012, 43, p. 566.
[3] Dennis R. LAKER and Jimmy POWELL, 2011, "The differences between hard and soft skills and their relative impact on training transfer" in *Human Resources Development Quarterly*, 22 (1), p. 112.
[4] J.K WELLINGTON, 2005, "The 'soft skills' of success: Be it high tech, low tech, or no tech" in *Vital Speeches of the Day*, 71, p. 628, qtd. by Robles 2012: pp. 453-454.
[5] Robles, 2012, p. 453.

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with American business people and executive decision-makers in an effort to determine their expectations from future employees. Robles's aim was to gather these essential abilities and forward them to business educators in the USA in order to include them in their academic curricula which would improve business graduates' chances of employability. Robles stated that the results of his research showed a proclivity of business executives towards soft skills, rather than hard skills. Therefore, he elaborated a list of ten essential soft skills which according to business employers are required from job candidates. These skills are the following: Communication, Courtesy, Flexibility, Integrity, Interpersonal skills, Positive attitude, Professionalism, Responsibility, Teamwork skills and Work ethic.

In the list below we can see how the interviewed business executives described each soft skill:

- "*Communication – oral, speaking capability, written, presenting, listening.*
- *Courtesy – manners, etiquette, business etiquette, gracious, says please and thank you, respectful.*
- *Flexibility – adaptability, willing to change, lifelong learner, accepts new things, adjusts, teachable.*
- *Integrity – honest, ethical, high morals, has personal values, does what's right.*
- *Interpersonal Skills – nice, personable, sense of humor, friendly, nurturing, empathetic, has self-control, patient, sociability, warmth, social skills.*
- *Positive Attitude – optimistic, enthusiastic, encouraging, happy, confident.*
- *Professionalism – businesslike, well-dressed, appearance, poised.*
- *Responsibility – accountable, reliable, gets the job done, resourceful, self-disciplined, wants to do well, conscientious, common sense.*
- *Teamwork – cooperative, gets along with others, agreeable, supportive, helpful, collaborative.*
- *Work Ethic – hard working, willing to work, loyal, initiative, self-motivated, on time, good attendance"*[6].

These detailed descriptions of the top ten soft skills point to the complexity of job requirements in the contemporary business world. This suggests that business students should be made aware of their importance together with the accumulation of business knowledge and technical abilities.

The following part of this article includes some (practical) recommendations for foreign language trainers so as to incorporate in their courses and seminars

[6] Robles, 2012, p. 455.

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activities which target the development of students' soft skills, following Robles's top ten list.

3. Enhancing Soft Skills through Foreign Language Courses

Taking into account Robles's research and the importance of students' development of certain soft skills it becomes apparent that educators should start focusing their attention upon this issue. But how can they discover and enhance these skills through their classes? Some of these abilities are innate and only require development, but others can be a little difficult to acquire in class, or otherwise, because they are linked to personality traits and (normally) cannot be changed. Perhaps only aiming at adjusting them could one solution.

Some of the most complicated skills to be acquired, taking into account Robles's findings, are Positive attitude, Flexibility and Interpersonal skills. If a student displays the exact opposite of these attributes it becomes virtually impossible for any trainer to help her/him to take advantage of them. What do you do if you have a pessimistic, rigid and introvert student? Can teachers and trainers change personalities entirely? The answer is no and in fact nobody expects such a radical transformation.

Yet, educators have the unique opportunity to try and give students at least some of the top soft skills required by business executives so as to improve their chances of success.

As previously suggested, language trainers can project through their work in the classroom the messages received from business executives. The soft skills listed by Robles can be matched to possible activities in the foreign languages classes so as to discover or develop them in students.

Out of all ten abilities, Positive attitude, Flexibility and Interpersonal skills are part and parcel of a person's innate disposition, therefore it is not plausible to believe that through foreign language courses trainers could help students acquire them. Yet, it is possible for teachers to make students aware of these three skills and their advantages and develop them through language classes. As mentioned earlier, most foreign language trainers in Romanian business schools currently employ a communicative approach to language teaching, therefore they can create scenarios in which students are required to act as employees motivators (to focus on positive attitude), or as negotiators or marketing agents (to improve flexibility and interpersonal skills).

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Communication, the first skill on Robles's list, has many facets and should not be restricted to what business executives have summed up as "*oral, speaking capability, written, presenting, listening"*[7]. Since we are living in a highly globalized world, communicative abilities are no longer linked solely to the process of transmitting and receiving information. Nowadays, effective (business) communication is also linked to people's capability to master knowledge about different cultural markers and to develop an intercultural identity. As communication specialist Young Yun Kim forwarded, "prolonged and cumulative experiences of communication between individuals of differing cultural backgrounds bring about systemic, adaptive changes in the individual's psyche"[8]. Contemporary business situations are most of the times under the aegis of converging multiple cultures, thus instilling in students what Heinz Antor called "dialogic communication"[9] constitutes one of foreign language trainers' most important targets.

Teaching students about cultural awareness can be done through activities which combine the accumulation of information about different cultural contexts and a more practical approach in which students can simulate real-life situations (for instance, role-play exercises with students acting as business people from around the world or debates about the danger of cultural blunders in a certain business context). Integrating activities targeted at developing not only communicative skills but also cultural awareness will transform the foreign language class into an up-to-date "laboratory" for the future business person.

Courtesy, the following soft skill on Robles's list, is an ability which is normally acquired through early education (just as Integrity, discussed further on). Nevertheless, through foreign language courses and seminars students can be made aware of the importance of manners in life and in business. Exploring tasks which not only have a linguistic input but also emphasize issues of etiquette across cultures is essential for preparing future business employees. From dress codes to guest protocol and handshakes, students can learn about the importance of adapting etiquette to diverse cultural backgrounds to which their potential business partners pertain.

[7] Robles, 2012, p. 455.
[8] Young Yun KIM, 2000, "On Becoming Intercultural", in *AmongUS-Essays on Identity, Belonging, and Intercultural Competence.* Eds. Myron Lustig and Jolene Koester. New York/Reading, Massachusetts/ Don Mills, Ontario: Longman, p. 61.
[9] Antor, 2006, qtd. in Monica BOTTEZ, 2010, *Infinite Horizons: Canadian Fiction in English.* București: Editura Universitară din București, p.121.

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Professionalism is a soft skill which in Robles's study stands for appearance only ("businesslike, well-dressed, poised"[10]). The most plausible way to target this skill through class activities is in connection with Courtesy (especially business etiquette). Tasks which involve the analysis of video materials (e.g. negotiations, business meetings) offer the teacher the opportunity to point out specific manners and appearance details and how they can influence the outcome of certain business contexts.

One of the thorniest skills in Robles's list is Integrity. When interviewed, business executives defined a person of integrity as one who is "honest, ethical" and who has "high morals, […] personal values, does what's right"[11]. Teaching somebody to be honest is a matter of early childhood education and not a skill to be achieved at university. However, we can try and enhance it. Through their classes, trainers should emphasize the significance of originality and should (most importantly) sanction plagiarism. Unfortunately, we live in the era of "copy and paste", with children learning to use internet resources very early and taking them for granted. Plagiarism is a real problem nowadays and through their work educators should be careful not only to sanction it but to explain to young people that intellectual theft is a felony which will always be penalized. Teaching the value of personal work is essential and students should always be rewarded in their efforts to nurture this ability.

Responsibility is a soft skill which can be approached alongside Integrity. One of the best ways to encourage students to be resourceful, reliable, conscientious (attributes attached to Responsibility) is through project-work. Respecting strict deadlines for submission will train them for their future careers in business and will teach them to develop self-discipline and goal-orientation. Another method to increase students' sense of responsibility is to encourage them to take on volunteering (extra-curricular) activities. In Romania, this type of social involvement is still maturing, therefore educators should make students aware of its importance for self-development and long-term benefits as far as experience accumulation is concerned.

The ability to work in a team (Robles's Teamwork skill) can easily be enforced through class activities. Sometimes students find it difficult to collaborate and understand the importance of reaching team goals. Since academic results are individual, they are more accustomed to working by themselves and achieving

[10] Robles, 2012, p. 455.
[11] *Ibidem*.

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personal objectives. Educators can guide group activities and explain the purpose of teamwork so that when integrated in a job environment, students will have at least some experience of what it means to bring individual contribution to accomplish a group goal.

Marcel Robles's interviewees describe Work ethic, the final essential soft skill, as "*hard working, willing to work, loyal, initiative, self-motivated, on time, good attendance"*[12]. Business teachers and trainers can target awareness of this ability by rewarding good attendance, motivation and initiative, so that students get the importance of these concepts and apply them later in their careers.

4. Conclusions

This article has started from the premise that (business) educators should focus their teaching activities not only on well-defined hard skills, but also on raising awareness and developing certain soft skills in students. We have seen that abilities such as intercultural communication, professionalism or teamwork, which are deemed highly important for students' future employability, can be dealt with during class activities, especially in the case of foreign language trainers. Seeing that in recent years the favoured approach to language teaching has been a communicative one, foreign language teachers in business schools have the unique opportunity to give students at least some of the top soft skills required by business executives (according the Robles's list).

As we have established, there is a large array of classroom activities which can be specifically designed in order to allow educators to target an expansion of soft skills in students. From cultural awareness to business etiquette and professionalism, we have seen that "through dialogue with the self and with the facilitator"[13] students can improve on innate abilities and acquire new ones which increase their chances of becoming the business employees of tomorrow.

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[12] Robles, 2012, p. 455.
[13] Culpin and Scott, 2011, p. 566.

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