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## DEVELOPING INTERVIEW SKILLS IN ENGLISH: HOW TO HANDLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

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### *Abstract*

Interviewing is an important part of the selection process since it enables the recruiters to discover relevant information which cannot be found in the supporting documents, such as creativity, spontaneity, enthusiasm, ambition, handling pressure and so on. In addition to assessing the applicant's interpersonal communication skills, the face-to-face interview enables the hiring committee to achieve a greater understanding of the applicant's key competencies and specific qualities. In order to be able to make a good impression at their first job interview undergraduates need effective preparation. Skill development activities can be included in Business English seminars, devoting time to CV and cover letter writing and to learning interviewing strategies which would enable undergraduates to present themselves to prospective employers and therefore to develop realistic expectations. The present paper is part of a broader project which will materialize in a students' book, whose main aim is to equip my Business English students with relevant skills which would increase their employability chances. It also advocates the ESP teacher's role as an adviser or a counsellor who plays an important part in undergraduates' personal growth. The material is designed to develop their public speaking skills, presentation skills, critical thinking, knowledge and competencies necessary to contribute to the society. The present paper focuses on the types of questions usually asked during a job interview.

**Keywords:** oral communication competence; interview skills; interpersonal skills; non-verbal communication;

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Technology evolves at an amazing pace having a great impact on the various means of communication. Business needs to change accordingly therefore students must constantly adapt and seek proper training in order to meet the new requirements of the jobs of the future. Nowadays the business environment places an increasingly greater emphasis on the ability to communicate efficiently. Potential employees must be able prove their ability to communicate interpersonally in order to share information in business meetings and discussions, to interact with their colleagues in a friendly work environment, with managers when presenting reports or graphs, as means of contributing effectively to the decision-making process and with potential clients when negotiating or trying to persuade them.



Undergraduates are generally expected to be able to deliver speeches to an audience mainly during their exam sessions or when they defend their dissertation or thesis. A job interview will always include a short oral presentation as part of the hiring process, which can be a nerve-racking experience. Persuading a hiring committee that an applicant has a skill set eligible for employment can be a challenging task but with the proper training it can be overcome successfully.

In my opinion academic training should be tailored to meet the specific requirements of the jobs of the future. The job market has changed significantly in the last years due to dynamic effects of technology breakthroughs. Consequently, the current needs and interests of undergraduates should be considered when designing English for Specific Purposes (ESP) materials, in general. It should be based on achieving realistic goals and objectives and focus on developing the main skills needed for employment in today's society. The present paper is part of a broader project which aims at helping my students increase their confidence in their own abilities and improve their employability skills thus facilitating the transition from discussing real-life situations to graduation and employment.

## 2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The complex role played by the ESP teacher has been widely discussed in the academic community. In my opinion, ESP teachers have a much more challenging task as in addition to introducing the new vocabulary related to various fields of business and reviewing grammar: they are expected to develop their students's employability skills in an attempt to increase the chances for career success. Therefore, ESP teachers need, as Basturkmen (2017:48) put it, additional skills and knowledge for the teaching process. I believe that their role is much more complex than that. In addition to being a skilled instructor and a designer of materials which would meet the undergraduates' specific needs in order to fulfil the expectations of today's business environment, I advocate for the role of the teacher as a counsellor, having a genuine interest in helping students and coaching them to perform better in a job interview thus playing an important part in their personal growth and career development. When I design my courses I always foster public speaking activities and project-based approaches that would provide opportunities for students to overcome shyness, to gain self-confidence and facilitate interaction. In the long-term this would enhance their oral production and improve their personal development.

A job interview simulation scheduled for my 3<sup>rd</sup> year Business English students was described in detail in Oprit-Maftei (2019). In addition to the job description analysis and self-analysis at the end of this activity my students will also be able to evaluate performance through self and peer assessment. The present paper is based on the same job interview simulation that harmonizes integrative learning with operational learning and mainly focuses on the types of questions used to differentiate applicants on the basis of their skills, abilities and knowledge.

Since the students enrolled in the International Relations programme study English for six semesters, the emphasis is now placed on being able to communicate efficiently rather than on grammar and vocabulary. At this level the focus is on developing special skills such as presentation skills, communication skills, public speaking skills and/or negotiating skills.

Dealing with questions in a job interview is an integral part of job interview simulation. My students are expected to deliver a short presentation introducing their career objectives, relevant volunteer work, main strengths and skills that would make them suitable for the job.

The hiring committee is usually made up of three or four students who are previously instructed to assess the following aspects:

- job interview etiquette (whether the applicants greeted them and properly introduced themselves using their full name, whether they initiated the handshake or not or sat down uninvited)
- body language (interview posture - straight back, shoulders are held back, position of arms and hands while speaking)
- eye contact (it is extremely important as it shows assertiveness and confidence or, on the contrary avoiding eye contact shows low self-esteem and anxiety)
- enthusiasm, creativity, open-mindedness and assertiveness (as these qualities are not displayed by the supporting documents)

- the way they handled questions bearing in mind that there is no perfect answer to many of these job interview questions, the interviewers just test the speed of reaction, logic and creativity; however clichéd answers should be avoided
- overall presentation (whether they described their background, volunteer work and character accurately avoiding, mentioned relevant qualifications for the job, provided examples to illustrate their main strengths and managed to convey the right message that they are a good choice for the position).

An extremely important stage of a job interview is the applicant's dealing with additional questions. After delivering the oral presentation each applicant is asked a (different) set of six questions which range from ordinary to odd. The teacher selects a set of six questions printed on paper and hands it over to the members of the hiring committee who are also recommended to ask questions of their own. The difficulty of questions is subject to the English level of each applicant. Regardless of the undergraduates' English proficiency levels, spontaneous and creative answers are highly encouraged.

Each interview usually starts with a lead-in question such as: *Why should we hire you?* which opens up further questions that assess how knowledgeable an applicant is, their level of creativity, work experience and so on.

Basically in any job interview, the hiring committee is mainly interested in certain aspects summarized by Innes (2016:12) as follows:

1. *Can the applicant do the job?*
2. *Will the applicant do the job?*
3. *Does the applicant fit in with the other employees and the organization as a whole?*

Therefore all types of questions which are usually asked during a job interview aim at finding out more information related to one of the above-mentioned areas so to help the hiring committee decide whether the applicant is suitable for that job.

McDermott & Reed (2012:15) identified five questioning styles which are selected by interviewers based on their level of experience:

- open questions – it is the most common type and the questions usually begin with *How, What, When, Why (How would you deal with an unhappy customer?)* – they require more than one-word answers such as *yes* or *no*;
- closed questions – they require a specific answer: *Have you ever used SmartPLS software application?*
- probing questions – used to ask for more detailed information such as *Tell us more about your experience ...*
- leading questions – usually begin with *I see you are skilled with Java?* or *In your cover letter you mentioned that you are a problem-solving person. Can you exemplify several cases in which you demonstrated your problem-solving skills?*
- combination questions – the interviewer combines two questions and multiple styles into one statement such as : *What experience do you have in making presentations and how do you rate your skills in this area?*

Basically the main types of interviewing questions identified by Verderber, Verderber & Sellnow (2010: 191-192) are the following:

- *warming-up questions* - used in order to establish rapport with the applicant in an attempt to help them overcome anxiety;
- *direct questions* - well-planned questions a priori designed and formulated especially to facilitate the disclosure of information relevant for the job requirements;
- *follow-up questions* – asked when seeking for additional information.

Doyle (2019) mainly distinguishes between the *behavioural interview questions* and *situational interview questions*. The former type of questions requires real-life examples of work-related situations showing how the applicant reacted in the past such as: *Tell us about a time when you worked under pressure*. Thus based on past behaviour the interviewers can identify the applicant's knowledge and skill set such as creative and analytical thinking, problem-solving, decision-making, risk-taking and others. The latter - *situational interview questions* help identify possible reactions to a hypothetical situation that

the applicant may face at work such as: *How would you react if you were dealing with a difficult customer?*

In addition there are *stress based and surprise interview questions* (McDermott & Reed, 2012:31) which are used by interviewers to find out relevant information in an unusual way, for instance large organizations like Google or Microsoft sometimes ask questions such as: *If you were an animal, what would you be?*

Due to time constraints we used a combination of questioning styles for our job interview simulation. The set of questions selected for each student included:

- one common question such as *Why should we hire you?* or *Why do you think you are suitable for this post/job/position?*
- one projective question investigating possible future behaviour and opinions such as *How would you be able to compensate for the lack of work experience?*
- one behavioural question for which we required examples based on the real experiences encountered by my students such as *What was the toughest job-related problem you have ever faced?*
- and ended with at least two odd questions such as *Which superpower would you like to have?* or *If you could have dinner with a celebrity, who would you choose?*

Most of the questions we used have been compiled as a result of fruitful collaborations with companies from the private sector and with HR professionals who were willing to share their expertise. Some of them were provided by former students who found this activity extremely helpful and wanted to contribute by sharing their experience with us.

### **3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The present paper aims at answering the main following questions:

1. Would a job interview simulation arouse the ESP students' interest in developing job-related competencies and improve their personal skills? And if so, would the correlation between education and the labour market requirements contribute to developing strong communication skills which in turn may foster good working relationships and boost career success?
2. Will this learning environment which promotes personal growth help them reach their potential and prepare them for the jobs of the future?

Over the last years ESP teachers have been complaining about their students' declining interest in grammar and vocabulary. Due to this type of activity my students' attendance rate increased and they admitted at the end of the semester that it was a motivating experience and even if it was nerve-racking it eventually proved to be a better way to construct knowledge.

### **4. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

It goes without saying that effective communication is extremely important in today's highly competitive work environment. In recent years there have been great concerns about the mismatch between graduate skills and the skills needed in the Romanian labour market. In order to get the maximum benefit from education and thus increase employability, universities have to make strenuous efforts to adapt their offers to the changing economic conditions. The present study aims at demonstrating that the students' communication skills would be improved, and their presentation skills could be enhanced by adapting the ESP material including activities which not only aim at raising the undergraduates' English proficiency but also relate to the overall process of personal growth. Such an approach would lead to the graduates' increased self-confidence and to higher employability rates at job interviews thus reducing the long term mismatch between the labour market demand and offer.

## 5. RESEARCH METHODS

The present paper is based on an experiment which involved my 3<sup>rd</sup> year Business English students. Their perspectives were gathered at the end of the semester in the form of questionnaire data.

Being able to communicate effectively is one of the major requirements of today's labour market. Well-developed interpersonal skills are highly sought by employers nowadays. Learning assertive communication techniques may strengthen relationships and help control stress, leading to increased self-esteem. My students admitted that, even though it was not easy to talk about themselves, they subsequently found it easier to talk about their strengths and weaknesses, to mark their attributes without being too modest or bragging. What is most important is that they learned a lot by objectively assessing their colleagues (due to the student-to-student peer assessment process) and they chose not to make the same mistakes. Not only did all students provide an affirmative answer to the question investigating whether the activity was helpful, but they also explained why I should use this activity with my future students, as well.

## 6. FINDINGS

When introducing this activity to the final year undergraduate students they were reluctant at first but soon they realized that in order to confidently articulate a coherent presentation at a real job interview they need to be well-trained and have strong communication skills. During these activities (oral presentations, interview simulations) the emphasis is always placed on developing communication skills and on overcoming public speaking anxiety.

The main difficulty when answering behavioural interview questions lay in giving specific examples of occasions in which they demonstrated particular behaviours or skills. When answering the situational interview questions or projective questions which investigate possible future behaviour or opinions, the undergraduates provided evidence of certain essential employability skills, which are increasingly more valued by employers, at such as communication, adaptability, problem-solving, decision-making or ability to work under pressure. As an exercise for all closed questions which required a short specific answer, we expected longer answers with examples based on the real experiences if possible, unless the question sounded like: *Can you describe yourself in one word?* Due to this activity they realized that employers don't expect to talk about something spectacular to highlight their employability skills, on the contrary, speaking about some common activities (for example planning a trip with their colleagues, scheduling and prioritizing activities and so on) may demonstrate certain highly-sought skills such as creative, organized, punctual, adaptable or persuasive.

Another stressful situation that any job applicant may encounter is to answer to the following question: *How would you describe yourself in three words?* Most of my students chose the following overused words ranked in order of frequency: *friendly, sociable* and *hard-working*. In order to make a difference the word selection could be rather challenging. The hiring committee is particularly interested in how an applicant thinks, which cannot be shown neither by common word nor by business jargon. The best way to deal with this kind of question is to be genuine and think about the qualities that best describe them. After these explanations their answers changed to *creative, ambitious, meticulous, generous, eager to learn, curious, empathetic*.

The odd or surprise interview questions were by far the most challenging. Even if it is generally recommended to take some time and think before answering when it comes to undergraduates who learn English as a second language, experience has proven that the faster they answered, the better the response. Unfortunately in many cases the more they thought and tried to answer a question like this in a memorable way it resulted in no answer at all, just uncomfortable silence which affected their self-confidence. By assessing their colleagues they learned how to be spontaneous and to convey enthusiasm.

An example of an unusual questions is *Would you prefer to be an eagle or a penguin?* Several students answered that they would prefer to be penguins as these marine birds live in colonies, help each other and are highly sociable. Only one student answered that he would prefer to be an eagle because thus he could fly high in the sky and see the most beautiful landscapes in the world. The take-home message from this experience was that there are no perfect or ideal answers to these questions but spontaneity, creativity and logic are the main factors to consider.

At the end of this activity my students found out more about how to answer to various types of job interview questions. Even if public speaking can be a terrifying experience for most undergraduates due to a lot of practice required by this type of activity they are now better-prepared. They also became aware of the non-verbal communication factors (posture, facial expression, body language, eye contact and others). They even understood the importance of a sincere smile.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Attending a job interview does not necessarily require public speaking skills; however an applicant is expected to be articulate, intelligent and knowledgeable.

As previously mentioned, all stages of a job interview need prior extensive research and preparation. Dealing with questions in a job interview can be a dreadful experience to anyone but especially to undergraduates who struggle to enter the job market. However a good command of verbal and non-verbal communication skills, proper job interview etiquette, confidence and a sincere smile are all key factors which may boost their chances of landing a job. These essential elements of success based on solid knowledge in their field of expertise would increase their self-confidence and therefore would lead to professional success.

Handling questions (which may range from ordinary to completely unpredictable ones) is not only about providing the proper answer spontaneously, it is a much more complex process which requires in addition to critical thinking skills and a good command of communication, body language, eye contact, facial expression, posture, hands and assertive attitude.

Improving students' professional communication skills is essential in today's society as employers expect graduates and even undergraduates to have excellent communication skills. Therefore the ESP teacher has to adapt the teaching material to meet the curriculum requirements, the specific needs of the ESP students and the labour requirements, transgressing boundaries and devoting special attention to the undergraduates' personal growth.

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