

# TRAINING ROMANIAN APPLICANTS FOR JOB INTERVIEWS AT FRENCH, BRITISH AND AMERICAN COMPANIES

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## Public, Level and Needs

**B**oth business English and business French are taught at the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest with a view to preparing the students for their future career.

As some of our students are likely to work for joint companies based in Romania or for the local branch of a foreign company, both language curricula include training the learners for the job interview.

This teaching unit is part of the language curriculum for students in International Business Relations and Economic Studies in Foreign Languages, at both intermediate and pre-intermediate level.

Their basic need is to sustain a job interview in the most appropriate language and with the most “culturally” suitable behaviour so as to obtain the job they have applied for.

The fact that all these students study both English and French is likely to cause certain difficulties of a cross-cultural nature, such as :

1. Difficulties arising from the insufficient knowledge of the differences between the French, the British and the American cultures.
2. Difficulties arising from the insufficient knowledge of the differences between the Romanian culture and each of the three foreign cultures.

The students who have studied the English language but are not aware of the cultural differences between the British and the Americans, as well as those having learnt both languages and who exhibit the tendency to transfer Anglo-Saxon behaviour into French, are faced with the first type of difficulties, while all Romanian applicants lacking cross-cultural skills are confronted with the second type.

Consequently, this presentation aims at explaining the influence of cultural features on the job interview, at establishing some guidelines for the Romanians applying for a job with companies originating in these

countries and at outlining the most appropriate methods and techniques for the cross-cultural teaching of the job interview, as well as the teaching objectives pursued.

## Characterising the Cultures

In characterising the three cultures, we have started from their features as set forth by Fons Trompenaars (features 1-3) and by Geert Hofstede (features 7-9). As to the attitude towards time, we have preferred Edward Hall’s “monochrome vs. polychrone” instead of Trompenaars’ “sequential vs. synchronic” (feature 6). We have also chosen the well-known dichotomy “high context vs. low context” instead of Trompenaars’ “specific vs. diffuse culture” (feature 5).

Characterising the Romanian culture has proved more difficult. On the one hand, no cross-cultural survey has been conducted on this country so far. On the other hand, Romanian society is undergoing huge political, economic and social changes which are likely to affect people’s behaviour.

Therefore, the description we have made of this culture is more adapted to the young post-revolutionary generation, i.e. the applicants’ generation, than to the older generations who have lived more under the communist regime. It is also based on several sources :

- for universalism vs. particularism [2, p 22] and [id. p 27] for collectivism vs. individualism;
- for masculine vs. feminine, power distance and uncertainty avoidance [14, p 113];
- [20], for description of neutral vs. affective cultures [p.70], acquired vs. ascribed status [p.105-108], sequential (monochrome) vs. diffuse (polychrone) [p 123], as well as the chart presenting specific (low context) vs. diffuse (high context) cultures [p.88].

The table below presents the cultural features of the three foreign countries and of Romania:

Features	France	United Kingdom	United States	Romania
1. Universalism/particularism	Particularist	Universalist	Universalist	Particularist
2. Collectivism/individualism	Individualist	Individualist	Individualist	Individualist
3. Neutral/affective	Affective	Neutral	Affective	Affective
4. High context/low context	High context	Low context	Low context	High context
5. Achieved/ascribed status	Ascribed	Achieved	Achieved	Ascribed
6. Monochrone/polychrone	Polychrone	Monochrone	Monochrone	Polychrone
7. Power distance	Large	Small	Small	Large
8. Masculine/feminine	Feminine	Masculine	Masculine	Masculine
9. Uncertainty avoidance	Strong	Weak	Weak	Weak

The features above are not like labels stuck on communities. They are gradual. For example, all these countries are individualist, but the United States are the most individualist of all. Both British and American cultures are moderately masculine, while the French culture is moderately feminine [13, p 81].

A masculine culture reinforces masculine values such as: assertiveness, self-confidence, aggressiveness, the wish to be promoted, competition. A feminine culture, on the other hand, reinforces feminine values like: modesty, communication, concern for relationships, empathy.

### **The Job Interview in France, the United Kingdom and the United States**

Like all the other situations of professional communication, the job interview is influenced by the three levels of culture: corporate, professional and national [20, p 7].

In our opinion, corporate culture is not relevant when teaching the job interview to students in economics. Such learners should be trained to cope with a typical interview accepted in most companies from the country whose language they are learning.

Professional culture is responsible for the similarities between the French, the British and the American interview, while the differences between them derive from their national cultures.

Our presentation will focus on two of the most important components of the job interview affected by national culture: the applicant's attitude and the types of questions.

### **The Applicant's Attitude**

The applicant's attitude during the job interview is influenced by the masculine or feminine nature of the respective culture. Thus, American applicants must assert themselves, must show that they are better and

more competent than they actually are [13, p 79]. They must appear ambitious, eager to be promoted and keen about their future career.

British applicants are taught to practice bragging before attending a job interview [6, p 30]. Bragging is not an easy task for people belonging to a neutral culture like that of the United Kingdom.

On the contrary, French applicants are advised to play down and to avoid excessive self-confidence. They should not "faire du cinéma". Eventually, it is better to be nervous, namely "affective" than to brag.

Individualism will also influence the applicant's attitude. Therefore, the representative of the most individualist culture, the American applicant, will say: "I'm the best."

The United Kingdom and France are less individualist. They also present certain features which are likely to soften their individualism. The British culture is low context, namely is it has a sequential view of life, activities and time. Therefore, the job interview is considered as completely separated from the other situations in which the British may find themselves. Hence, the British applicant is not supposed to prove his value, but his suitability for the job: "I'm the best for this job."

France is high context, so everything the applicant is or does is relevant. Consequently, he has to prove that he is special, to stand out not necessarily as far as the job is concerned, but also by his extra-professional skills. For example, speaking a foreign language very few people speak or having an unusual artistic skill is a pro during the job interview. So, the French applicant will say: "I'm original."

### **Question Types**

Sharing the same professional culture, interviewers from the three countries will require information pertaining to the same fields. However, different weights will be attached to each field. The table below

shows the percentage of questions referring to each field asked during job interviews in France, Britain and the United States.

Field	France	United Kingdom	United States
Skills	10	10	8
Managerial skills	3	5	-
Achievements	3	3	2
Failures	2	2	2
Career plan	1	7	10
Time management	2	1	-
Relationships with bosses and colleagues	12	15	6
Attitude towards work	35	39	32
Motivation	1	1	2
Attitude towards self	4	11	6
Attitude towards life	1	-	8
Attitude towards school	14	-	16
Attitude towards military service	1	-	-
Attitude towards money	-	1	-
Knowledge of the company	7	3	4
Extra-professional activities	2	2	2
Salary	2	1	-

Attitude towards work is the most important for interviewers from all the three countries. Attitude towards school comes second in the USA and France. On the contrary, in Great Britain, where traditionally academic degrees are not held in high esteem, applicants do not have to answer questions in this field.

Relationships with bosses and colleagues play an important part in the French and British interview. This is normal for particularist France, while a more complex explanation should be provided for the British culture. More than the French, the British would like to know if the applicant can work in a team (two questions against one in the French interview) and how he is going to treat his subordinates (one question against none for the French). What the British would like to know is in fact how the applicant will fit into the company's structure and if he is able to observe its rules. As for the Americans, their universalism makes them ask fewer questions in this field.

Attitude towards self, as a sign of individualism, is important for the British and less important for the French. As the American applicant is supposed to brag and the interviewer to believe only half of what he says, there are not so many questions concerning the

image the applicant has about himself.

Questions referring to career plan are relevant for the two masculine monochrome Anglo-Saxon countries and less so for feminine polychrome France.

On the contrary, hierarchy is important in large power distance France, and so is knowledge about the recruiting company. Such knowledge is less important in the other two, small power distance, countries.

Though the applicant's skills are one of the reasons why he is hired, questions referring to them are not so prominent in the three interviews, as this type of information can be found elsewhere (in the curriculum vitae/résumé, the letter of application, and the references).

The British and the French ask a few questions about the applicant's managerial skills. Although the wish to be promoted is highly appreciated in the USA, owing to their low context, sequential culture, the Americans reserve these questions for those applying for managerial positions.

Attitude towards life is much more important for the Americans, who check the applicant's civic sense, highly appreciated in their democratic society.

As for the attitude towards the military service, it is only the French who ask a question in this area, thus assessing the applicant's respect for power and hierarchy.

Questions referring to achievements, failures, motivation and extra-professional activities/hobbies have fairly similar weights in all three interviews, while slight differences can be noted as concerns time management, attitude towards money, and salary.

### Some Guidelines for the Romanian Applicant

The problems facing the Romanians applying for a job in a joint or locally based foreign company will arise in the areas where there are differences between our culture and that of the respective country.

Reverting to the table which presents the cultural features of the four cultures, we note that the France is the closest culture to Romania. There are only two differences between these countries: feminine culture in France vs. masculine culture in Romania; strong uncertainty avoidance in France vs. weak uncertainty avoidance in Romania.

The cultural differences between Romania and the United States are far greater: the Americans are universalist, monochrome, low context, while the Romanians are particularist, polychrome, high context. The Americans believe in acquired status and small power distance, while the Romanians believe in ascribed status and large power distance.

The gap between the British and the Romanian culture is even wider. Like the Americans, but unlike the Romanians, the British are universalist, monochrome, low context, with acquired status and small power distance. In addition, they are neutral, while the Romanians are affective.

Broadly speaking, the guidelines for the Romanian applicants will consist of some dos and don'ts they should be aware of as their own culture has taught them differently.

### **The French Interview**

#### **Dos**

- focus on your attitude towards work
- speak well about your boss and colleagues
- emphasize your originality as far as extra-professional activities are concerned
- quote other people's opinions about you, rather than your own
- prove that you know the recruiting company
- show initiative, at least once during the job interview

#### **Don'ts**

- don't be assertive
- don't enlarge on your professional skills and achievements
- don't lead the interview – let the interviewer do it as he is better placed in the company's hierarchy

### **The British Interview**

#### **Dos**

- focus on your attitude towards work
- be detached when you speak about yourself
- have a definite career plan
- speak well about your boss and colleagues

#### **Don'ts**

- don't enlarge on your academic achievements and theoretical knowledge
- don't enlarge on your professional skills and achievements

### **The American Interview**

#### **Dos**

- be very assertive
- be the best
- prove your civic sense

- focus on your attitude towards work
- have a definite career plan

#### **Don'ts**

- don't enlarge on your professional skills and achievements
- don't point out your managerial skills

### **Teaching the Job Interview in French**

The first part of our presentation has laid out the background of the cultural differences Romanians may face when applying for a job with a foreign company. As announced at the beginning, we have only concentrated on the national level of culture.

In the second part, we would like to focus on details and present methods and techniques used when teaching recruitment. We have chosen the example of the French job interview, but similar techniques can be applied to the other two provided a thorough analysis has been conducted and the right teaching materials found.

The table showing cultural features proved that out of the three cultures considered, the French one is the closest to Romania. However, when we come down to details, we find important cultural and ideological differences. This is perfectly understandable considering the recent history of the two peoples and the fact that an iron curtain separated them for almost half a century. Such differences can cause misunderstandings and deceptions on both sides [10]. We therefore believe that as teachers of business French it is our duty to raise our students' awareness in this respect.

We have decided to integrate the cross-cultural approach into our curriculum when we realised the difficulties encountered by our former students, brilliant learners and fluent speakers of French, when starting a career with a French-Romanian joint company. By this we do not mean the normal difficulties any young person faces when leaving school and starting work, but difficulties arising from lack of awareness as far as the cross-cultural ingredients of French business communication is concerned.

### **Teachers' Aim**

In our opinion, teachers of business French should aim at several objectives:

1. Acquiring the cross-cultural dimension of communication, through reading;

2. Getting to know the French-Romanian joint company;
3. Rethinking foreign language teaching so as to include the cross-cultural dimension;
4. Adapting and/or creating new interdisciplinary teaching materials.

In what follows we will focus on the last two objectives.

### Teaching Techniques

The methods and techniques used when teaching recruitment are, in a chronological order: case studies, reading authentic and adapted texts (dialogues included), examining authentic documents, doing various exercises (listening included), simulations and role plays, group discussions to evaluate the players' performance using arguments and comparisons.

Just by enumerating these techniques, one can easily realise the impact they have both on cross-cultural and

linguistic training.

### Teaching Materials

When designing our teaching materials, we start from the following assumptions:

- on the one hand, they should address various senses as each individual is likely to react better to a certain category of stimuli (auditory, visual or kinetic);
- on the other hand, the job interview should be taught as part of the whole recruiting process, not separately from the earlier steps (the job advertisement, the letter of application, the curriculum vitae).

### Teaching Objectives and Techniques

The table below presents the teaching objectives, the skills we aim at developing in our students, as well as the techniques we use.

Teaching Objectives: developing the following skills	Teaching Techniques
a. General cross-cultural skills in business French	- Individual reading - Reading and commenting - Case studies
b. Reading	- Examining genuine documents (job advertisements)
c. Writing	- Writing letters of application and CVs (based on model examination)
d. Listening	- Listening to job interviews
e. Speaking	- Dialogue studies - Simulations

#### a. General Objective: developing general cross cultural skills required in a job interview

Specific Objectives	Operational Objectives	Teaching Techniques
Understanding how French companies and French corporate culture operate	Raising students' awareness about the French corporate culture	1. <i>Case study</i> – “The Gerbaud case” [8], which focuses on the consequences of hiring the wrong applicant. It is a good example of power distance in the French culture [13] 2. <i>Individual reading/reading and commenting</i> - Business French textbooks - French authors (like Ph. d'Iribarne, M. Crozier, etc.) - Foreign authors (like G. Hofstede, F. Trompenaars, J. Mole)

#### b. General Objective: developing reading skills – extensive reading of job advertisements

Specific Objectives	Operational Objectives	Teaching Techniques
1. Reading job advertisements: - published in Romania - published in France	Reading genuine advertisements so as to understand their	a. Finding the applicants the most suitable for the job; b. Discouraging applicants who are not suitable for the job;

Revealing the cross-cultural dimension by comparing them to American/British job advertisements 2. Reading newspaper language as newspapers are the most important advertising media for employers based in Romania	objectives	c. Improving selection based on the proper documents; d. Enhancing the company's image
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c. General Objective : developing writing skills – writing job advertisements, letters and CVs

Specific Objectives	Operational Objectives	Teaching Techniques
1. Writing a job advertisement for the local (and foreign) labour market 2. Raising students' awareness of the text and its implications	1. Reading genuine job advertisements 2. Finding the most important information in the advertisement	- Groupwork: choosing a company and a job. This can be done in several ways: • Choosing a company the students know (by reputation / for having worked there as volunteers) • Choosing a company which is actually recruiting (for its Romanian or foreign branch) • Imagining a newly established company which is recruiting its personnel - Writing the job advertisement according to a given plan
1. Writing: - a letter of application (solicited or unsolicited) - a CV - a hiring letter - a rejection letter  2. Learning the business style	Adapting the written document to the job	- Examining model letters from textbooks, books written for the French applicants, books written for the French employers - Studying the letter plan and the functions - Writing letters suitable for the job (according to a plan provided by the teacher)

d. General Objective : developing listening skills – extensive listening of job interviews

Specific Objectives	Operational Objectives	Teaching Techniques
Understanding native speakers at a job interview	Understanding various accents (from different French-speaking countries and regions)	- Listening to job interviews from textbooks [5] - Listening to native speakers simulating job interviews

e. General Objective : developing speaking skills – successfully participating in a job interview

Specific Objectives	Operational Objectives	Teaching Techniques
1. Learning language, body language and proper behaviour during the job interview 2. Observing general rules of face-to-face communication 3. Observing cultural features	1. Practising proper language and body language while in a job interview 2. Training for the job interview itself	- Exercises based on Neuro-Linguistic Programming (rephrasing, etc.) - Training exercises [5] - Studying dialogues from books written for the French applicants and employers (opening formulas, closing formulas, functions) - Simulations of job interviews for a specific job in a specific company

Several aspects should be clarified before simulating the job interview, then assessed after the performance. They concern the applicant's behaviour, speaking and

body language. Firstly, as far as behaviour is concerned, the main points to be considered are:

- was the applicant logical in his presentation?
- did he let the interviewer lead the interview thus showing his respect towards hierarchy?
- did he prove his initiative by at least once asking a question without being specifically invited?
- was he curious, lively, flexible?
- was he quick in assessing the situation and handling new information?

Secondly, considering the verbal language, the Romanian applicant should be aware that the French interviewer will look at the following issues :

-can the applicant quickly and properly understand questions asked by a native speaker, including figures, dates, years?

- can he ask questions correctly in French?
- is his pronunciation correct enough for him to be understood?
- does he use complex well structured sentences instead of elliptical ones which are considered impolite in French?
- is he fluent?
- does he use adverbs and quantifiers?
- does he use more verbs than nouns thus showing that he is a dynamic person?
- can he rephrase questions correctly when he wants to check that he has understood them?
- does the pace of his speech seem “natural” in French?

Thirdly, body language should be taught along with verbal language and it should include: proper dressing, eye contact, stance, hand shaking, politeness. As the Romanians smile less than the French in a formal situation, the students should be taught to smile especially when they thank the interviewer. Otherwise, their thanks will not be noticed and they will be considered rude.

### Three Recruitment Role Plays

#### First Role Play – Pair Work – Whole Class Performing at the Same Time

Each student in the class writes a job advertisement. The teacher collects the ads, corrects them and gives each student his own ad and that of another student. The class is divided into two. During the first part of the game, half of the class will play the part of the interviewer for the advertisements they have written, while the other half are the applicants. They will have had time to study the ad and to write their CV. The interviews will take place in pairs, simultaneously. During the second part of the game, the interviewers

become applicants, and the applicants, interviewers. The students change pairs after the first interview so that those who have failed should not try to “take revenge” on their former interviewer.

The main advantage of pair work is that students may perform freely in front of their fellows, not having to worry about the teacher assessing them and correcting their mistakes.

### Preparation

#### The Interviewer

He will be given a plan of the interview, a list of questions and a set of language functions to be used at the beginning, the end and during the interview.

He will also be instructed to make the applicant feel comfortable and to be a good listener.

He will be free to choose the questions from the list which he considers most appropriate for the job.

#### The Applicant

He will be instructed to ask for clarifications, to ask questions about things that are important for him.

He will not know what questions he will be asked so he will have to be spontaneous.

#### The Teacher’s Role

The teacher’s role will be to explain the procedure, to make sure that the students have understood the instructions and to keep the timing. He/she will not interfere with the contents of the game.

#### Follow up

The follow-up consists of a class discussion evaluating the performance of both interviewers and applicants according to a set of criteria provided by the teacher.

#### Evaluating the Applicants

The interviewers have to do the following evaluations and to answer the following questions:

1. Evaluation of the applicant’s appearance, body language, speech rate, intonation.
2. What are the most important points in the applicant’s biography?
3. Evaluation of the applicant’s education:
  - how did he choose his field (own choice, family influence)?
  - what are his academic achievements?

- how does he see his education?
  - what were his extra professional activities?
4. Evaluation of the applicant's work experience:
- does he have any work experience? What are his achievements?
  - did he follow any training courses? Were they profitable?
5. Is the applicant motivated?
- what are his expectations (promotion, remuneration, status)?
6. Are his hobbies and interests relevant for the job?
- The interviewer may be given an evaluation sheet to fill in with details about the applicant's personality:

- communication skills
- rude/polite
- outspoken/reserved
- funny/dull
- frank/dissimulated

He may be asked to write down a short evaluation based on a set of criteria given before the interview: appearance, communication skills, speech, culture, adaptability, steadiness, ambition, professional skills and experience, strengths and weaknesses.

Each interviewer tells the class if he accepts or rejects the applicant and finds arguments to justify his opinion.

The applicants who are rejected can challenge this decision and find arguments to oppose it.

The teacher makes sure that the debate does not turn into a dispute.

Finally, the teacher provides the three questions according to which the applicant is accepted or rejected:

1. Can the applicant do the job? (Does he have the professional skills required by the job?)
2. Will the applicant do the job? (Is he motivated?)
3. Will the applicant fit in? (Is he suitable for the company? Can I manage him?)

### Evaluating the Interviewer

The interviewer has to answer the self-assessment questions below :

- Did I avoid interrupting?
- Did I put the applicant at ease?
- Did I speak less than one third of the interview time?
- Did I get the information I wanted to get? If not, why?
- Was I thorough enough on the most important points?
- Did I listen properly?

- Did I lead the interview?
- Did I provide all the necessary information on the company, the job, etc?
- Did I provide factual information?
- Did I avoid answering certain questions asked by the applicant? Did I hide important but embarrassing information?
- Did I avoid taking notes? If I took notes, are they useful?
- Did I close the interview properly?
- How could I have improved my performance? [21, p. 225].

The applicants may disagree with the interviewer's self-assessment if they can back up their opinion by arguments.

### Second Role Play – Simulating a Job Interview with French Native Speakers

The young Frenchmen working for the Cultural Service of the French embassy have done this role play with our students. They gave the students genuine job advertisements for young business graduates. All the students drew up their recruitment files including letters of application and CVs.

After having been corrected by the teacher, the files were handed over to the Frenchmen who commented on the language and the cross-cultural aspects.

Three files were then selected. The three applicants left the room. One by one, they were called in and interviewed by the French. Their peers who had not been selected observed the interviews and took notes.

At the end of the simulation, the Romanian observers commented on the applicants' answers, arguments and body language.

Finally, the French took the floor and explained the pros and cons, strengths and weaknesses in the applicants' performance, focusing mainly on cross-cultural aspects.

### Third Role Play – During the Final Examination

The students are given a job advertisement suitable for their professional expectations so as to motivate them strongly.

They are also informed that only one applicant will be given the job, but the others can also get a good mark for their performance.

The written examination consists of writing a letter of application and a CV. The oral examination consists of a job interview, the interviewers being the teachers.

The students have to compete with each other to get



the job or, at least, to get a good mark. This enhances their motivation.

Besides assessing their performance, the teachers will also assess their speaking based on the usual criteria.

The main advantage of this simulation is that it puts students under pressure, as in real life.

Teaching the job interview in a foreign language and

from a cross-cultural point of view by means of the above methods and techniques is a meaningful experience for the students considering that they are strongly motivated to find a job with a joint company. At the same time, it is a way of getting acquainted with other cultures. And this can only enrich a person and lead to a better knowledge of one's own culture.

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