JOB HUNTING – AN OBJECTIVE
FOR CURRICULUM CONSIDERATION

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Introduction

Job hunting and **applying for a job** have, by now, pertinently claimed their status of a prerequisite for any young graduate in search for a career perspective. Obviously, the issue needs to be tackled within the framework of a larger and more complex process of finding and obtaining the desired job employment. As part of the teaching-learning process this must necessarily include: awareness raising of cultural levels, communication skills acquired on the basis of a well defined function-focus, letter of application, CV, job interview, and not only. Against this background, job hunting brings along its most instrumental contribution as regards raising the learner's awareness about the job market, about his/her own educational and professional assessment, about corporate/institutional culture relevance and, as a whole, about the almost institutionalized practice of what is now called career-preparation.

Curriculum Considerations

It has long been perceived as commonplace the fact that any modern curriculum should be designed and employed as a multidirectional, eclectic, ongoing-process development tool for learners targeting most varied vocational objectives.

As H.H. Stern cautioned upon teachers with a narrow focus on the teaching-learning process, it is of utmost relevance, if not a duty, to observe the fact that the efficient and operational *"... embeddedness of language in culture and society and in the individual's life"* should be a prerequisite and prime consideration in curriculum design and development [9, p. 176-221]. To extend Stern's allegation, parameters like *culture*, *society* and *the individual's life* should necessarily and dutifully be approached at specific and well conceptualised levels of interest. This may successfully bring to fact a well-balanced match between the teacher's objectives, the learners' hidden agenda (students' beliefs, preoccupations and expectations resulted from life experience) and the dynamics of the socio-economic context they perform or are supposed to perform in.

Therefore, it stands to reason that flexibility and openness need to punctually observe areas such as content selection, methodology, task selection and use, classroom organizational patterns, teaching strategies, and so on. Such desiderata have become all the more imperative and indispensable for any system of education hosted by true open-market economies and societies based on building and fostering a genuine system of values.

It goes without saying that, nowadays, the concepts of globalization and subsidiarity have made job markets of higher standards and requirements include foreign languages as a prerequisite for most career openings. Hence, without contemplating an exclusivist approach, job hunting seems to have also steadily and rightfully claimed a place in any foreign language (FL) curriculum.

In dealing with such a topic, other activities may be usefully incurred in larger curriculum sections and attached to topical packages such as "Applying for a Job" or "Job Interview". Equally, for reasons of building the students' increased proficiency in the matter as a whole, such packages need to be preceded by teaching-learning sessions including:
- various types of communicative interaction;
- business communication;

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- official correspondence;
- designing a letter of application and a CV, etc.

Equally, a wide range of teaching-learning scenarios and techniques may be easily and most instrumentally employed, ranging from: writing, reading, speaking, listening and mind map design, to role-play, role prescription and pair/group work, to critique, assessment and evaluation, as well as to individual or group decision-making, plenary debate and so on. [see 2 and 3].

For fruitful outcomes, tasks design should effectively be oriented towards covering the "overcoming of odds" issue and include appropriate and pertinent skills-training in: sell- yourself strategies, gist cards, index cards, direct contacts, networking and so on, as described later in the present paper.

Since students are, presumably, fairly familiar with the concept of culture shock, a mine of possible sources of task design could result from approaching job hunting, via the equation: **culture shock - corporate culture**. This proves a most constructive and necessary educational and vocational desideratum, considering our students' fairly scarce knowledge of jobs potential against the present status of the Romanian market economy, the institutional framework in force, the foreign investment, the economic globalization, the taking over of the *EU Aquis Communotaire,* and so on.

Starting from the assumption that communication, language and cultures cannot be separated, teaching-learning activities/tasks of any type [cf. 1], designed to cover the whole range of task typology in this respect, should necessarily target:
- awareness raising of cultures and corporate cultures operational peculiarities and differences;
- helping students to tune in to a targeted cultural context;
- encouraging the spirit of investigation and separation of relevant particularities in connection with a certain institutional or corporate culture. Here the interest should lead to the conclusion that every such culture exhibits distinct operational patterns that are implicitly associated with the everyday life of the host context/culture: administration, employment, housing, insurance, shopping, socializing, family life, etc;
- in view of the above, awareness and sensitivity raising as regards differences of various kinds, as well as individual and group accommodation or behaviour tolerance issues (private or professional) are of capital relevance. Here, for instance, cross-cultural role-plays and culture flowcharts (both

rendering sequences of events in a given cultural process) may help pinpoint types of misunderstandings between people and/or institutions (at all levels of interest) and offer the appropriate solutions. It is true that the language of business has become increasingly standardised and globalised, fact that considerably eases the passage through the operational paradigm definable as: *"cultural fluency > behavioural fluency > linguistic fluency"* [10, p.65]. However, the concept of subsidiarity needs to be cautiously observed and, therefore, cultural peculiarities should be respected and even internalised to the point of avoiding any counterproductive courses of action;
- inter-institutional/inter-corporate cultures contacts. Special emphasis should be laid here on intrinsic characteristics underlying the foreign investors' professional and operational policies, on the one hand, and the local labour force and administrative-legislative framework, on the other (administrative bodies, professional value systems, regulation frameworks, social and professional structures, etc).

In sum, any task design rationale following such patterns should render most useful series of evaluative approaches for well-focused and profitably applied interventions.

It is our contention that, primarily in FL curricula, such teaching-learning focus will usefully contribute to rounding up a training pattern, both well conceptualized and no less situationally and culturally oriented. Such an approach to curriculum design will come as proof of Giroux' allegation, according to which language, beyond its descriptive facet, is also a means of reproducing values and norms embodied by an accepted socio-economic context [7, p. 257-293].

In the same line of thought, any extrapolation of the issue from an FL curriculum to that of any other subject, is justified and mandatory, whenever job hunting and/or job application become issues under consideration.

Job Hunting and Specific Performance Objectives

Now, more than ever, education is about preparing young people to cope with the requirements of a flexible and ever-changing job market, ultimately aiming at enhancing their employability. In this context, helping students develop the skills required to manage the job search process successfully should clearly be one of the major objectives not only of the curriculum as a whole, but of the FL course as well, particularly when it addresses a specific purpose.

Statistics, as well as the experience accumulated so far clearly prove that, ultimately, job hunting is a process of *"overcoming odds"* and managing what may be called a *"frustrating experience"*. To exemplify, here are some such odds which, if not properly managed, may easily turn into frustrating experiences:

- lack of awareness as regards the capital difference between the *"open job market"* and the *"hidden job market"*;
- wrong timing in contemplating a future career, ultimately, overlooking the fact that job hunting should become a preoccupation for any future applicant, long before his/her graduation.
- many of the positions available may not require a college degree;
- the person hired is not always the one that does the job best;
- by virtue of the high competition involved, job advertisements are, as a rule, not the best sources of quality jobs and profitable future careers;
- traditional job search practice and methods have resulted in failure rates that are, indeed, mind bothering.

The FL teacher, whose main objective is to prepare the students to communicate efficiently and effectively in the real world and to enable them to enter the job market successfully, should clearly devote part of the course to the skills needed to manage the job search process and avoid frustrating experiences such as those mentioned above. This means designing learning tasks meant to familiarize the students with the various steps involved in attempting to find employment, and creating opportunities for developing their communication skills in simulated life-like situations.

It is important, however, to be aware, and make students aware, of the fact that, paradoxically, in many instances, traditional job hunting methods – those that most of the potential applicants resort to and depend on – have proved to be designed "to screen people out", rather than to offer long-term rewarding choices for desired careers.

Statistics show that job markets, as a rule, cover just a little over 50% of the job potential. Therefore, to avoid placing job seekers at a competitive disadvantage, research work and practical experience have often concluded that the open job market be used only as a supplement or an alternative. Instead, subjects are more and more insistently encouraged and directed to learn **how** to penetrate and make best use of the hidden job market. The two main avenues leading to an efficient penetration of the hidden job market have

been considered to be A). *networking,* i.e. developing interviews through members of the applicant's network, and B). ***direct contacts,*** resting with the applicant's focus on direct and ongoing process contacts with the employers researched and selected (for a detailed description of the job hunting process and the various steps involved consult [4]).

In class, the self-assessment process and the other steps involved in networking can be usefully facilitated through mini-sessions of self-reflection followed by pyramid discussions.

It is not difficult to see that FL teachers can play a useful role in helping students tackle the hidden job market, particularly by preparing them for effective communication through simulated phone calls, meetings and interviews, along with letter and e-mail writing. Various interactive classroom activities can help the future job seekers develop the self-confidence and interpersonal skills essentially needed in the process. Similarly, awareness-raising discussions can offer a valuable format for developing good knowledge about how to handle the most asked interview questions and how to project a confident image of professionalism. Discussions and interview role-plays can also help enhance students' knowledge about how to package and market oneself effectively, by focusing on presentation skills, communicative interaction techniques, body language, conversation turn-taking, etc.

Cultures <> Institutional/Corporate Cultures

Undeniably, modern foreign language (FL) curricula are more and more focused on cultural, cross-cultural and intercultural issues, in general. However, only in comparatively rare cases, do teaching objectives seem to have been devoted and designed to particularizing the interest and directing it to levels such as *institutional or corporate cultures*. The term, although often overlooked or not given adequate attention, is, paradoxically, an element underlying each and every professional/vocational existence and interest. It can be defined (starting from the mentioned concepts of *culture* and *sub cultural context*) as *"an internal regulations code of professional behaviour"* including particularized operational and communication patterns, professional behavioural skills, conduct norms and value systems, management strategies, personnel and workforce regulations, corporate/institutional identity and acculturation processes, all leading to the projection of a unique institutional/corporate business physiognomy.

The contact with the specificity of a new corporate/ institutional culture may easily be experienced by a newcomer as a true culture shock and, thereby, bring along confusion and misunderstanding, inadaptability and counterproductive reactions.

Probably, it is in order here to highlight Geert Hofstede's thesis involving the necessary and consciously applied process of *"unlearning"*, a most efficient and commonsensical course of action for the adaptability of any individual's "mental software" or "cultural being" to a new cultural context. According to Hofstede, *"learning how to unlearn"* implies the capacity and the will to develop the loss of the old habits in order to make room for the new/innovating element [8].

Definitely, the process implies training as well as self-training in the dynamics of flexibility, in the area of analysis and synthesis, decision-making, positive interventions, creative reactions, and so on.

To reiterate and then develop upon Hofstede's definition of culture – "*culture is always a collective phenomenon, a collective programming of the intellect that distinguishes the members of a certain group or category from others*" [8] – and scale it down to a sub contextual level - that of the institutional/corporate culture - we should always bear in mind and act upon elements such as: collective programming of the intellect and/or behavioural patterns vs. the individual's own mental and behavioural software, differences at the level of professional categories and

institution organisational structures, the capacity of the individual to react to change positively and profitably, awareness of and respect for any new professional context.

In this context, *institutional or corporate cultures* should always be approached as "sub cultural contexts" of the "larger cultural umbrellas", already frequently and intensely dealt with in educational and vocational programmes. In so doing, desiderata such as a well targeted skills development and awareness raising, will penetrate these topical levels, even to most sensitive detail and will go down from the cultural and cross/inter-cultural levels as a whole to community, institutional or corporate sub contexts.

Conclusion

Considering the aspects discussed above, we could end by reiterating that in dealing with the dynamics of the instructional and vocational-forming processes, such as jobs and future careers, institutions and companies have evidently become part and parcel of any career or professional interest. The context as such needs to be extensively tackled by education and training programmes in any modern and productive curriculum. At the same time it stands to reason that the process should imply various and constructive courses of action, in which adaptability, flexibility, openness and tolerance towards novelty and change need to be carefully observed and professed.

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