SOFT SKILLS – INCREASING THE GRADUATES′ EMPLOYABILITY

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Abstract

Our country is one of the states that co-signed the Bologna documents, as well as those which followed, all meant to harmonize national and international views and requirements as far as the European educational systems are concerned. Within this framework, particular interest should be given to increasing university graduates' employability.

The paper discusses a major change in the foreign language curriculum at tertiary education level which is envisaged in response to the period's demands, i.e. developing the students' soft skills. Stakeholders' current positions and viewpoints are reviewed. A proposal is advanced, which focuses on developing CLIL type courses centred on increasing the learners' awareness of the major soft skills required/expected from a university graduate at the first job search stage. The relationship between employability and soft skills education is analyzed.

Key-words: tertiary education, curriculum change, soft skills, CLIL, employability

1.   Soft skills – an outline

There is no full agreement on the definition of the term *soft skills*, but, although this may be of interest mainly in unfolding conceptual operations, it is more important to outline here a *general framework* that should encompass the views on this issue of most of the stakeholders – employers, education institutions at all levels, future employees a.s.o. This is due to the fact that, in our times, we simply cannot disregard the importance of soft skills in increasing *employability chances* of tertiary education graduates.

The literature of the field is rich in nuances that may be useful in understanding the multiple facets of the phenomenon. Thus, Hendricks [10] defines *life skills* as those that support a person in attaining success in 'living a productive and satisfying life'. In Hendrick's model of life skills (see *The Targeting Life Skills (TLS) Model*), quite numerous elements are included by most authors among the range of soft skills. The model divides life skills into four quadrants, governed by the 4 Hs of a clover: Head, Heart, Hands and Health, with each of the groups subdivided under two or more categories. Although the basic purpose of the model is to display a form of coordination between life skills and ages and tasks, we are going to emphasize that, in our opinion, the model provides us, teachers of ESP, useful insights for our activity not only as language teachers, but also as CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) teachers. Below we provide a list of skills from Hendrick's model that are already – or that can be – included in the domain of competence of language teachers, with a view to improving the students' soft skills, for better employability and in order to attain success in their professional and personal lives:

- HEAD - *Managing* (Keeping records, Wise Use of Resources, Planning/Organizing) and *Thinking* (Critical Thinking, Problem Solving, Learning to Learn);

- HEART – *Relating* (Communication, Cooperation, Social Skills) and *Caring* (Sharing, Empathy);

- HANDS – *Giving* (Leadership, Contributions to Group Effort) and *Working* (Marketable Skills, Teamwork, Self-motivation);

- HEALTH – *Being* (Self-responsibility, Managing feelings) and *Living* (Stress Management).

To complement this manner of understanding of life skills, we should add evidence from sources such as [15], a site called *Life Skills Education*, aiming to help people to identify ways of improving their lives and find work. Under the generous label of *Life skills* we can find chapters devoted to: *career skills, personal improvement, getting work* and *keeping a job*. Under each of them counseling and useful ideas are offered at all levels of the involved factors: companies, educational actors and applicants. Under the *Career Skills* chapter, the site authors underline the fact that, in the USA of our days, the unemployment rate is in constant flux, which results in millions of people having to be ready for what has been called *work transitions*. All stages of a worker's career are addressed and the readership consists of private and public agencies, outplacement counseling programs, college career centers and training professionals.

As members of the educational organizations, we are certainly interested in understanding the relationship between *soft skills* and *hard skills*, with direct applications on the change that should be operated and generalized in non-philological tertiary education institutions curriculum, by introducing a *coordinated modular flexible comprehensive* teaching of soft skills.

The understanding of the *soft skills* concept has evolved quite significantly over the last decade or so. Thus, Rao [26] shows that they refer especially to attitude and behaviour, leaving knowledge and/or technical aptitude to those called *hard skills*. The various terminological umbrellas to be found in the literature for soft skills are: *people skills, life skills, interpersonal skills, employability skills* and *domain skills*. We share the general opinion that the name in itself is not so important, provided that everybody understands the hard core of all these labels, viz. 'the ability to communicate'; hence, the special interest that language teachers - whose objective is to develop the communicative competence of the learners – are entitled to give to including them in the courses they can provide.

Hewitt [11] justifies the *people skills* label, pointing out to features such as *intangible, personality-specific* skills of the *non-technical* type, that can increase the strengths of a person as a leader, listener, negotiator and conflict mediator.

That the domain of *soft skills* is still being much investigated in order to establish its paradigmatic features is proven by the many viewpoints to be found in the literature as to what exactly they cover. Thus, for Woods et al. [36] they are *process* skills; for Pauw et al. [21] – *social* skills, while for Campbell and Giles [3] they are *generic* skills, a term explained in-depth by both Nor [20] and Khairi [13], who connect them with 'success in one's career'. Nor [op. cit] has investigated the field, showing that these abilities are labeled in various countries as follows:

- *Key* skills – Great Britain,

- *Essential* skills – New Zealand,

- *Employability* skills – Australia and Canada,

- *Workplace know-how* – the USA,

- *Critical/enabling skills* – Singapore,

- *Transferable* skills – France,

- *Trans-disciplinary goals* – Switzerland.

They are all, irrespective of their name, revolving around the idea of attaining success in finding employment, as well as later in one's career. The following are listed as soft skills:

communication, critical thinking, ethical, managerial, team, life long learning, problems solving.

Noguez și Espinosa [19] identify the correlation between soft skills and the hard ones that a graduate should possess. We can discover a more refined and complex point of view with Challa [4], who tries to correlate the 60 soft skills (which are also called in Australia and the USA – *world* skills) he identifies with the employment level of a person. Thus, he mentions three main groups: *corporate* skills, *employability* skills and *life* skills. As we are interested here in *employability* skills mainly, we list Challa's set of skills that employable graduates (and freshers!) should develop: *communication, team working, leadership, initiative, problem solving, flexibility and enthusiasm*. It is important to add his just remark that, after all, 'every skill helps us to learn one more as they overlap each other'.

In the same line, Lorenz [17] provides a list of the *most common* soft skills: *strong work ethic, positive attitude, good communication skills, time management abilities, problem-solving skills, acting as a team player, self-confidence, ability to accept and learn from criticism, flexibility/adaptability, working well under pressure*, while a site of an important educational centre ambitiously provide a 'comprehensive' list of soft skills, which we reproduce below, as it can be used as a *checklist* for teachers who embark upon developing the students' abilities of this kind: *observation; know yourself (introspection); openness and flexibility (paradigm shifting); internal motivation and passion; action orientation, drive and self initiation; self development; self confidence; assertiveness; integrity; trustworthiness; composure and self presentation (appearance, manners and etiquette); intellectual horsepower and learning; creativity and innovation; conviction; moral courage; dependability and reliability; dealing with ambiguity; time management; goal setting and result orientation; decision making; problem solving and process orientation; organizing; coordinating; delegation; communication (speaking, listening, empathy, body language, writing); interpersonal skills; negotiation; conflict management; presentation; convincing; coaching and developing people; counseling; mentoring; team work; team building; consensus building; conducting meetings; leading; big picture thinking and strategic thinking; motivating others; controlling; safety; stress management*.

We find a more practice oriented approach with Hansen and Hansen [9], who provide a useful list of what they label as the *critical employability skills*. Their list can be used by both recruiting agents and applicants, as for each skill a brief description of that particular ability is given, which can be used throughout the job search process.

For the same pragmatic reasons, many other studies in the field literature, for instance [25], provide subdivisions of soft skills into *subskills*, which facilitates curriculum - and later on course designers, quite significantly, when they have to decide precisely on *what* skills they should focus. For [9], *marketable skills* are subdivided into five main subcategories/subsets: *communications*, *research and planning*, *human relations*, *organization, management and leadership, work survival*.

To conclude with [32], soft skills can be seen as having also the role of enhancing the quality of traditional hard skills type of subjects, by 'making them relevant and engaging for the learners'.

2.   Employability and soft skills education – points of view

When we discuss what can be done by universities in terms of endowing the students with the required soft skills for increased chances of employability upon graduation, we should also analyze the matter from the perspective of the *employers*. Their views are important, as in our times the general trend is that, due to the crisis and some other factors, in most countries companies do not or cannot afford to invest too much in *in-service training* of the soft skills type. Hence, a clear attitude of most employers of selecting, from among a list of candidates with the same technical background, in the case of engineering graduates for instance, those who can display a personal active portfolio of soft skills, with good *communication* abilities ranked first. There are numerous such examples, but we have chosen [1] – a BMW company representative of the employers' point of view in this respect, who demands applicants to possess good abilities in communication and people's and resources management – in order to stay competitive on a market characterized by the necessity of the *work force mobility*.

If we continue by discussing what is currently the importance attached to soft skills requirements in the *job search process*, we can depict some general trends. A US governmental source [34] presents the results of a report on the kind of skills required to new entrants to the 21st century US workforce, with soft skills occupying a rank equal to that of hard skills, 'or even more important'. It is shown that a great majority of young applicants do not possess the required level of such soft skills. Moreover, we agree with [37], who point out honestly and critically that 'soft skills are increasingly becoming the hard skills of today's work force'.

A range of studies [7, 8, 9] draw the attention upon the fact that some of the skills required to applicants for a first job can be – or should be – transferred from previous training in secondary and tertiary education; lists of such skills are provided, and the potential employees are advised to adopt a *skills orientation* approach in selecting what courses they take at undergraduate level, so that to develop skills that are transferable to their first workplace.

Reciprocity from universities and other forms of training organizations is natural – they provide comprehensive lists of suggested courses to develop skills that the prospective employers ask for. Moreover, and more useful, they provide details of the courses or disciplines offered by the university and detailed lists of the skills under emphasis in each of them.

One may ask how the soft skills each candidate is required to have can be *accurately measured* at job interview time. The literature [9, 22] suggests reliable modalities of measuring the candidates' level of soft skills – a fact that is useful to them, as well, as they can learn how to prepare for such tests. We will exemplify from the area of job interviews addressed to IT specialists at entry level. For them, as far as their hard skills are concerned, a working test is enough - and objective, too. As far as the soft skills of the interviewees are concerned, they are placed in a *work-related scenario*, with a critical situation to solve, and they are asked to provide the instruments and manner of handling that potential situation to the best of their capabilities. We could comment that such an approach is strongly marked by subjectiveness, but it can give a general idea of the candidate's abilities in a working environment, mainly as far as *communication, negotiation, power of decision* and *team work* are concerned. Naturally, as Vogel [35] emphasizes, candidates should become aware, and very fast, too, of the fact that soft skills preparation may make the difference – they can actually bring them the job they have applied for, tipping the scales in their favour if the recruiters have to choose from among a group of candidates with the same range of hard skills, as, besides their professional knowledge, what matters most in work is the 'inner attitude' of the person – a.k.a. their *soft skills*.

Moreover, the good news is that, according to [12], people are able to evaluate their own *soft skills quotient*. It has been reported by research that the ratio between hard skills and soft skills that accounts for a person's productivity is 15%, to an impressively high 85%, especially nowadays, in a global context of economy in a state of crisis. The site provides 60 skills, underlining that they can be applicable to *all* fields of human endeavour. Such

information is really useful to university curriculum planners and course designers, that should take them into consideration.

Rao [26] refines these remarks, pointing out that we do not discuss only about the first job moment, but that there is a *shift of emphasis* in terms of focus on hard, or on soft skills, at various phases in the employment record of a person.

Let us analyze the reverse of the medal, viz. the fact that the human mentality may be difficult to change. As Clemmer [5] shows, there are still managers, lacking breadth of views, who think soft skills are 'just a lot of fluff'. They are the typical minimal leadership qualities managers, who would rather focus on technical experts and 'snoopervisors' to see the job done. Undoubtedly, they are wrong, as pointed out in a survey presented in [38], that tells us that a valuable employee 'will grow and learn as the business changes'.

In what follows, we will briefly examine what soft skills are included in the different courses provided worldwide by various organizations, in order to show the variety of approaches that exists at the moment, which can represent a good starting point for *flexibility* of *content* and *methodology*, on the basis of a sound *needs analysis* and with precise *course objectives* set in a realistic manner, for any such soft skills training we may envisage to design and carry out. We are also trying to identify the key *recurrent* elements of such soft skills oriented courses. We give them in a tabular form below (see Table 1), specifying the type of organization providing the training and the main foci in each case:

Table 1. *Soft skills training examples*

o.	Organization	Focus
	Cambridge International Training Centres Sudan [2]	*Mix of communication, linguistic and managerial abilities*
	Software Engineering Competence Center, 2007 [27]	*Project management, negotiation, presentation, engineering and business written communication*
	NIIT - Learning Solutions To Accelerate Your Organization [18]	*A mixed program of soft skills (business behaviour and etiquette, leadership skills, efficient communication) and foreign language skills, including job interview behaviour skills*
	The Harvard Project Management Program [31]	*Oral and written communication, meetings, the relationship with the media*

This type of approach is confirmed by Sharatkumar Variyar [28], who goes one step in depth, underlining the logical correlations between the *business paradigms in IT jobs* with the *soft skills required* to satisfy these paradigms; for the former – *project management, knowledge/systems/quality processes management, innovation and productivity* vs., for the latter – *team work, knowledge of English, written and oral communication, sensitivity to intercultural issues, creativity, stress management.*

We will put an end to this section, in which the stress has mainly been put on listening to the voices of the actors in the employment challenge, by showing that globalization can ultimately affect the workplace quality in a *positive* sense, as shown by Vogel [35]. In response to the new conditions, employees worldwide tend to develop a new set of cross-cultural and language skills, that should help them to be successful in a much more multinational environment. Consequently, it is expected that many more companies should see and understand this tendency and decide to put more resources to equip staff with 'language, culture and flexibility' – all so much needed in a truly global work context.

3. Anticipating the market demands – developing soft skills in tertiary education

But what is the current situation in universities, as far as the hard *vs* soft skills ratio is concerned? As Ziegler [39] maintains, referring to the non-philological tertiary level, the importance of soft skills is still assigned a very *low* value, although, he shows, *communication* and *professional attitude* abilities at the workplace are a necessary foundation in generating the top performance engineer profile produced by technical universities. The result is that the graduates do possess sound technical knowledge in most cases, but they (almost) totally lack the kind of preparation needed in order to face the requirements of the environment in which they will have to perform.

That a change of the broad approach is necessary has already been anticipated in some countries, India for instance, where the government has reshaped their national curriculum [5], giving higher priority to soft skills teaching and learning at all educational levels. The focus is on the so-called *Modular Employable Skills (MES)*. What is envisaged is the creation of a framework for soft skills development, modular and flexible, with an adequate testing and certification system, focused on multiskilling and skills permanent upgradation, with vertical and horizontal mobility, and providing life long learning opportunities, with positive influence upon all the stakeholders (individuals included in the program, employers, the economy and the state itself).

In those states that are moving forward in including soft skills in the national curriculum, research [20] mentions two important models of teaching them. The first one is called the *diffusion* model – the abilities are explicitly taught in courses centred on them, while in the second model, the *infusion* one, soft skills are subtly instilled in other academic courses.

Pulko and Parikh [23] have a slightly different approach, more flexible, we believe, pointing out that *explicit* soft skills can be included, in a more or less explicit or implicit manner, in the teaching of other courses. There should be an initial explicit section, acting as an awareness raising sort of impulse for the learners, followed by a relatively implicit approach to the teaching of soft skills. In fact, the result is very close, really, from the CLIL approach, which is, we maintain, a good path for language teachers to take in embarking upon the teaching of soft skills within their language courses. Naturally, as the two authors [23] emphasize, the field is relatively new, therefore the so-called 'soft skills culture' has not had time enough to develop and reach maturity and to find its right place in the specific technical university contexts.

Moreover, as Sharatkumar Variyar [28] shows, soft skills should be taught under the umbrella of *more than one discipline*, with the necessary amendments required by the specific features of each educational context, as there is a hard core of three recurrent fundamental competencies: *communication abilities, psychology* and *the sound knowledge of the discipline*.

Nor [20] underlines the mutual relationship between the roles of hard and soft skills, respectively, for an accomplished engineer, pointing out that the role of the study of foreign languages can help engineering students to reach a high level of efficiency as technical specialists: on the one hand, the students acquire the linguistic and communication abilities useful for the daily communication acts at the future job, and, on the other hand, this ability gives them the necessary support in finding their personal balance and attaining a fully developed complex personality. The same views are shared by a representative of the employers, [1], that stresses the fact that such soft skills courses should also be introduced - with the necessary tailoring, we can add – to the students who aim to work in the R&D area.

In what follows, we will briefly present a range of viewpoints regarding the various aspects that should be taken into consideration when a soft skills course is introduced in the curriculum and designed for the tertiary education students. They should be seen as *complementary* advice to curriculum and course designers in generating a high quality educational construct:

- Hendricks [10] maintains that soft skills should be integrated into the curricula of *all* educational levels;

- Sims [29] emphasizes the fact that schools alone cannot prepare the youth for their life work, therefore all the actors (public agencies, organizations, employers, communities, parents, and the school system) should cooperate in developing what she calls *workskills for youth*;

- UNICEF [33] provides the five main points of focus in redesigning the curriculum and implementing change in education, with chances of maximizing the *quality* of programs and their outcomes: focus on the *learner*, on *content* of curriculum and materials, on the *processes* employed in design and delivery of programs, especially *teaching* and *learning methods*, as well as the *social forces* which are involved in shaping them, on the *instructional environment* and on the *outcomes* in terms of *learning achievement*;

- Training centres, such as [15], explicitly list the most important skills required to employees at various stages in their career. We suggest that most of them can be taught within an English language course at B2/C1 levels in CERF terms, by the English language teacher, in CLIL type of courses, using a combined infusion/diffusion approach. Examples of such skills are: *the job search package* (letter of intent, CV/Resume, preparing for the interview), but also *personal development* (effective goal setting, stress management), *career skills* (how to be successful in the first job, how to be productive on job, handling difficult situations/people) a.s.o.;

- In our global working environment, with an increased level of workforce mobility, one element to take into consideration for the soft skills curriculum design is the *intercultural* factor, as Longatan [16] points out. Attention should be given to what she calls the *soft skills of intercultural management*, which include taking into account the 'employees' cultural backgrounds and personal orientation towards cultural dimensions'. The following are included in this area: *a long-term vs. short term orientation, collective vs. individualistic sense of identity, need for achievement vs. social nurturance, avoidance of uncertainty, and orientation towards power*;

- A necessary focus on *transferable* skills – defined in [24] as 'skills you have acquired during any activity in your life - jobs, classes, projects, parenting, hobbies, sports, virtually anything - that are transferable and applicable to what you want to do in your next job'. The site quotes K. Hansen's series of articles about *transferable skills* used in teaching, for instance, cover letter writing, from which it may useful to select some for a better understanding of the concept, especially for those teachers who may wish to make the soft

skills teaching process easier by including and reinforcing them: *Communication* (speaking effectively, writing concisely, listening attentively, expressing ideas, facilitating group discussion, providing appropriate feedback, negotiating, perceiving nonverbal messages, persuading, reporting information, describing feelings, interviewing, editing), *Research and Planning* (forecasting, predicting, creating ideas, identifying problems, imagining alternatives, identifying resources, gathering information, solving problems, setting goals, extracting important information, defining needs, analyzing, developing evaluation strategies), *Human Relations* (developing rapport, being sensitive, listening, conveying feelings, providing support for others, motivating, sharing credit, counseling, cooperating);

- Smith et al. [30] go one step further and present the results of a research project investigating an enhanced approach to the development of *transferable* skills. After identifying the skills repertory, the learners are given 'a series of focused participative skills training exercises with a strong engineering context'. It is a good example of the way good practice and innovation in learning and teaching in higher education engineering are collated and disseminated. It also provides guidance in the line of 'embedding of quality learning and teaching in higher education engineering'.

From all the above examples, as well from our own practice in attempting to design soft skills oriented courses (see Catelly, Yolanda-Mirela, 2009, *Scientific and Technical Communication in English – Course Slides*, Bucharest: Editura Printech, ISBN 978-606-521-359-3, 256 pp.), we can derive an open conclusion, recommending, in line with Nor [20] and many other authors in the field, that, at the level of the non-philological tertiary education, with proficient students linguistically, a foreign language course/module/master program should, in fact, perform two roles in the academic development of the future graduates:

- firstly, to increase the learners' level of linguistic and communication proficiency

and

- equally important, and feasible - as we have tried to demonstrate in this study, to endow them with the *soft* type of skills that can be conducive to turning them into profesisonals, with a balanced well-formed personality.

This can equally be seen as a crucial contribution of the humanistic and social sciences in shaping up the new generations of non-philological universities graduates.

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