THE LANGUAGE CLASS,
AN ENVIRONMENT FOR DEVELOPING SOFT SKILLS

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Abstract. Foreign language teaching has broadened its scope and objectives, blurring content boundaries, discovering environments and provoking approaches. As the job market is constantly redesigning its framework and reaffirming values, the fundamental skills future employers need are creativity, flexibility, collaboration, teamwork and emotional intelligence (world economic forum, 2016). The aim of this paper is to shed light on the importance of developing such skills within the environment created by the language class in a non-philological university. The students in life sciences within the BUASVM "KING MICHAEL I OF ROMANIA" FROM TIMISOARA are training in various specialties but soft skills are also an important dimension of their learning curriculum. Our endeavor to plan our language courses and activities from an ecological approach offers opportunities to make students aware of the impact of soft skills on both their professional training and social integration in a working context.

Keywords: ecological approach, soft skills, foreign language, learning environment, social integration.

INTRODUCTION

The world is facing rapid economic and social transformations, followed by cultural and educational consequences that cannot be ignored or looked upon without concern. Both educators and learners of all profiles and levels suffer the impact of this challenging and problematic environment. Several questions arise such as: *Are knowledge acquisition and developing specific professional skills the only priority of the modern student?* or *How do soft skills integrate a Life Science student's academic life?*

We will start by giving a brief explanation of this dichotomy soft versus hard skills and of the representations students have of it. Hard skills are skills you can gain through education (in all its forms), a variety of trainings, during classes or on-the-spot trainings at work, and they can be or not certified. On the other hand, soft skills are less palpable and more difficult to define and evaluate. These abilities are personal, and they are profoundly linked to emotions, to the strategies that we develop in order to understand ourselves, our life and our jobs.

In this over-technologised environment, the return to our inner processes, which make us human, in the end, has become a priority and a fundamental search. Practitioners and employers have realized that hard skills do not assure the employees' success on the working market. Another reason why these skills are decisive is because they are transferable skills, meaning that they can be used regardless of the job at which the person works. Therefore, adaptation comes easier and naturally for people who have developed these skills in their background training, either at school or in a working context.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The public we have targeted for this study is the 1st and 2nd year students in Life Sciences faculties, namely Agriculture, Environment, Food Processing, Veterinary Medicine and Rural Management. In the light of the present situation, acquiring skills for a future job should be of utmost importance for students when they enroll for an academic project. In fact, it is a multimodal approach: learning for discovery doubled by learning to make a difference through meaningful actions afterwards.

Our data corpus includes testimonies of students regarding their representations on both skills demanded in order to perform in a job and the type of activities they usually do throughout the year in the foreign language class, English or French, depending on their choice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

New Skills and a New Environment: the VUCA Environment

Our research has been highly inspired by the World Economic Forum's report (2016) and its top 10 skills one needs in order to thrive in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Updated data and new input have led to an improved of competencies bearing in mind the growth of robotics, artificial intelligence, biotechnology or genomics. Researchers, human resources and strategy officers have come up with the following hierarchy of competencies people should develop at all stages and learning levels in order to adapt to the new working environment by 2020:
1. Complex Problem Solving
2. Critical Thinking
3. Creativity
4. People Management
5. Coordination with Others
6. Emotional Intelligence
7. Judgement and Decision Making
8. Service Orientation
9. Negotiation
10. Cognitive Flexibility.

At a glance, all these skills are in the area of *soft* skills and they are particularly valuable for the environment we learn, work and live in. As we have chosen the ecological approach of learning and teaching (VAN LIER, 2004, KRAMSCH, 2008), the concept of *environment* has an impact on our language teaching strategy and on students' broader context of learning. An enlightening example can be found in an interview with CLAIRE KRAMSCH (2012:74) on her book the "Multilingual Subject". The idea that inspired her was to counteract the perception that a foreign language learning "is all a question of learning dry conjugations, declensions, vocabulary and grammar that having nothing to do with the emotional life of the learner, particularly learners who are thought to be elite learners, that is learners who do not have an absolute necessity to learn a foreign language." In other words, teaching a foreign language to Life Sciences students cannot be reduced to grammar and vocabulary exercises, but it has to go beyond this objective and to challenge the learner to use the new language as a medium to discover other worlds, either interior or exterior.

Ecolinguistics has provided us with a holistic and open framework to study the phenomena of foreign language acquisition because it highlights the emergent nature of language, the role of affordances in the environment and the mediating dimension of language in the educational endeavor and the economic success. A new type of environment has become more and more present in the educational area although it has transgressed from the business context: the *VUCA environment*.

- **V** stands for 'volatility' (the changes are unexpected and may be difficult to predict their duration);

- **U** comes from 'uncertainty' (we all live with a lack of predictability and in a continuous state of surprise);

- **C** gives us 'complexity' (linear thinking and acting is updated; the new realities are much more complex and require differentiated solutions);

- **A** from 'ambiguous' (certainties have disappeared in a world of unpredictability).

The VUCA environment and the above-mentioned desired skills should have a crucial role in how we envisage education nowadays. Objective realities in non-philological or social faculties show that there is a lack of initiatives in the direction of developing soft skills as an integrative part of students' skillset. Acquisition and development of technical skills in certain specialties and possession of diplomas or certificates are no longer the key to a successful job in the broader context of the gap between what the work market demands and the academic environment offers, and taking into consideration the emergence of multiple possibilities for on-the-spot job trainings and qualifications. However, these soft skills are needed, and they are considered priorities in every employee's professional profile. That is why we do believe that the language class environment, as part of the faculty curricula, can provide the appropriate conditions for discovering, analyzing and practicing these skills.

Transversal Skills and Language Learning

As class practitioners, we normally focus on language and communicative skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing. Integrating more skills and giving complex tasks based on finding solutions and implementing them could open a new perspective in language teaching and learning. We often fall in the trap of delivering ready-made statements such as "you need foreign languages for your job", "knowing a foreign language is a plus in your CV" or "the latest data or information are in English on the Internet", etc. Although our students agree and we feel that we have done our job, they do not always have the same representations as we have on this phenomenon. The practicality of teaching, namely what learners do with language, where they use it and to what purpose (RICHARDS & RODGERS, 2001:141), is a welcoming lighthouse in our work. For example, asking students to work in groups on a project like "Environmental Solutions for Your City" could stimulate students to activate different skills, linguistic, communicative but also integrative:

- Reading skills in English (or other languages) for documentation purposes at different reading levels and accessing various types of texts (articles, books, PowerPoint presentations, etc.)
- Listening to radio shows, podcasts, videos or films about the given topic;
- Speaking in order to gather the information found by each member and make a draft of their work;

- Writing when preparing a poster, a presentation, a leaflet with their ideas or a promotion poster.

There are only a few possibilities for teachers to blend in skills and still remain in their area of knowledge, control and ability. However, the language class is the perfect, safe space for interaction, for expression of ideas, feelings, fears or bravery acts. Given these guidelines for 2020, we should challenge even more of our students, both for their development and ours, and therefore introduce new tasks such as:

- *People & Community management*: negotiating roles and responsibility in their group; forging the community and its purpose; weaknesses and strengths management and reflecting upon their actions within the community: how they behave in conflictual situations or who has mediating skills; how they use or misuse empathy or what are the ways of supporting themselves in difficult or stressful moments;
- *Emotional Intelligence* assessment in games such as the role-play between a client and sponsor, the presenter of the project and its beneficiary;
- *Negotiating* as a key skill, developed within the community but also in all interactions, and making use also of different levels of knowledge such as field knowledge, financial skills and a series of psychological strengths (persuasion or active listening);
- *Creativity* which could be at its most meaningful heights in an open, tolerant, and mistake-friendly environment such as the language class. It is well known that the levels of creativity are uncommonly low in the academic environment compared to primary or secondary school. Therefore, practitioners have to embark on an adventurous experience in order to reboot students' creative resources.
- *Cognitive flexibility* is tightly connected to the creative core and is particularly demanding on the part of the students because they tend to lose their curiosity and to become less responsive to out-of-the-box initiatives.

In order to activate and develop these soft skills, we should go back to the main cause of our complex situation, which is understanding our students better and more profoundly. Being more audacious, we would add helping our students to know themselves and to use the information for higher and meaningful purposes. This observation leads us to a notion that has not entered the vocabulary of language learning, namely *pleasure*. C. KRAMSCH uses it as a more appropriate variant of *motivation*. As she points out "pleasure is fundamentally linked to your senses, to your perceptions, and to your sense of well-being and happiness" (2012: 78). We want our students to learn because they find pleasure in the act of doing so and because they find benefit in language learning. In turn, students have to find that pleasure for themselves and to use the English language learning environment as a ground for expression and initiative.

CONCLUSION

Rather than generalizability, an ecological approach of educational research strives for opening and encouraging dialogue. Furthermore, dialogicality is also a sustainable skill as it generates dialogue out of the pre-existing interactions between members of different communities. *Soft* skills are at the core of the modern mindset and the basis for knowledge and its organisation. As Kramsch underlines "the articulation of local and particular experiences,

might lead to global changes, not by way of generalizability, but by way of analogy, because dialogue implies the emergence of shared experiences (KRAMSCH, 2008: 27).

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