

Responding to the Workplace Globalization by Advocating the Teaching of Soft Skills in Tertiary Education

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Resume : *La période contemporaine est caractérisée par l'influence indéniable de la globalisation sur tous les niveaux de la vie humaine, un phénomène qui a changé aussi le domaine de compétences au lieu de travail. En répondant aux tendances actuelles, les étudiants qui vont devenir les futurs employés, essayent d'acquérir une gamme nouvelle de compétences techniques (hard) et surtout des compétences communicationnelles (soft), pour être mieux équipés dans un environnement multinational. Par conséquent, les universités doivent assurer un taux considérable de telles compétences, étant donné qu'elles sont cruciales. Quand même, il y a beaucoup d'universités dans notre pays qui accordent un intérêt disproportionné au développement des compétences professionnelles, en considérant que celles-ci influencent le succès d'une carrière, tandis que nous soutenons que ce sont les compétences communicationnelles (soft skills) qui comptent aussi, parce qu'elles rendent un candidat plus éligible que ses pairs avec la même formation professionnelle. La littérature montre que sur notre marché globalisée, la demande pour les compétences professionnelles (hard skills) va décroître en relation avec la demande pour les compétences communicationnelles, parce que les premières peuvent être externalisées plus facilement, tandis que le problème des derniers est plus difficile à résoudre. Pour assurer la mobilité de la force du travail et la chance d'optimiser leurs résultats dans des compagnies multinationales, le système éducationnel doit être réformé pour être capable d'offrir des compétences nouvelles pour les étudiants qui vont essayer d'explorer des carrières d'une orientation plus globalisée. Les compétences communicationnelles qu'on devrait inclure dans le programme d'études vont de compétences de langue et communication au développement personnel et manageriel et encore plus loin à la sensibilité culturelle et l'éthique du travail. Le but des professeurs devrait être celui de former une génération qui puisse agir d'une manière confiante dans un environnement globale. Cet étude se réfère à l'expérience que l'auteur a eu avec la création d'un cours d'Anglais CLIL pour la Communication Scientifique et Technique pour les étudiants – ingénieurs de l'Université Polytechnique de Bucarest. L'auteur envisage de l'étendre aux autres cours modulaires de compétences communicationnelles dans le contexte éducationnel décrit. Nous espérons que ceci encouragera la génération des compétences transférables et l'amélioration du dynamisme du capital humain pour atteindre le succès dans le contexte globale où nous vivons au présent.*

Mots clés : *globalisation de l'emploi, éducation tertiaire, compétences communicationnelles (soft skills), CLIL, changement de programmes d'études*

Motto:

"I was getting my hips replaced when I started thinking about where my hips are from. I found out that my hips were fabricated in Germany and designed in France - I have French designer hips...The reality is almost every company doing business and producing is doing it all over the world."

"Globalization and Its Discontents" (2001) - Robert Reich, former United States Secretary of Labor - Lecture delivered at the University of California

1. Background – workplace globalization trends

The period we are living through is definitely characterized by the influence of the phenomenon of *globalization*. This is taking place in different areas of human activity. Among the results of this redefinition of the societal paradigms, a reshaping of the workplace skills has been initiated over the last decades.

In response to the workplace globalization as a trend, the major stakeholders in tertiary education – universities, students, potential employers and so on – should make every effort to develop a new range of both *hard* and especially *soft* skills, so as to equip graduates with the necessary portfolio of competencies that would qualify them as strong competitors in the current enlarged multinational environment.

In 1991, as Reich pointed out [3], globalization – as a theory – was in its very essence mainly of an economic nature. Its institutions, of industrial, financial or commercial type, were considered to be interconnected and homogeneous. Moreover, the information and communication technology, including education, followed that path. Ten years later, the same author was still maintaining an amount of optimism as to the value of

globalization, provided that the main areas of discontent identified, viz. concerns over wage instability, exploitation of foreign workers and a lack of cultural sovereignty, should be acknowledged and thus the “fears of globalization” should be diminished.

The American politician and theorist takes stock of the growing presence and advantages of globalization, but also of the concerns causally connected with this economic and social movement. “Globalization is a concept that has moved directly from obscurity to meaninglessness without any period of coherence,” Reich claims, pointing out that the general perception of people is of a negative type, involving mainly “international competitiveness or exploitation”.

Globalization demands a redefinition of *workplace skills*, as Vogel [7] shows. According to recent surveys of the global workplaces, employees worldwide should develop a range of new *cross-cultural* and *language skills* that could enhance their success and chances to attain prosperity in an ever more multinational environment. The majority of individuals who answered such surveys, as the Global Workforce Solutions Kelly Services, quoted by [7], underline, consider that the experience they gain in a globally oriented environment can become decisive to their careers.

In our opinion, the discussion of whether hard skills or the soft type ones should take precedence in tertiary education is *not* really efficient, as both do have their significant role in supporting a person to become successful in today’s globalized market.

If, for various reasons, such as traditionalism, refusal to change or even inability to design and implement new educational policies etc., the view that hard skills are the only factor of decision in getting employment at the beginning of the newly graduates’ career is still predominant with some environments, for most academic circles it has become evident that what matters to an equal extent is, according to [7], “the inner attitude that matters in work and private life - in other words: it's the soft skills that make an applicant interesting and distinguish them from other applicants with the same or similar professional qualifications”.

In an attempt to define *soft skills*, which are also labeled as *transversal* or *transferable* skills, we can show that they basically cover:

- aspects of communication (mostly in foreign languages),
- interpersonal skills,
- teamwork abilities,
- personal management skills,
- self-development skills.

There are multiple literature references to the scope and content of *soft skills*, although not necessarily wholly coinciding. However, we consider that they essentially refer, as the hard core of their substance, to the abilities necessary to any employee in order to thrive in the workplace while handling international barriers of all types quite confidently.

One of the aims in the contemporary society is that the working force of the present and of the future be endowed with many (transferable) skills, in order to facilitate its mobility and smooth displacement to almost any location on the planet on short notice, in response to the business dynamic requirements. At present, it is the employers that devote resources in order to equip staff with the skills they need to become successful in a truly global context.

We believe that, for obvious financial and selection reasons, the training process in soft skills should begin and take place *in universities* - to a greater extent than this is being done now.

As shown by Koncz [2], who describes the results of a job outlook survey, communication skills are at the top of the skills sought in potential employees, followed by

analytical skills, problem solving skills, the ability to work in a team, technical skills and a strong work ethic. It is the work experience and the professional (hard) skills that are the key criteria. Nevertheless, with equally qualified candidates, the tipping of the scales is caused by the presence or absence of soft skills.

We claim that the various effects of globalization on options of policy makers and decisional factors in education systems worldwide should be taken into consideration, as they represent as many examples of usage that can prompt answers and solutions.

Thus, a Middle East focused education reform project report [6] speaks about the need of countries in that region, as well as in North Africa (and the information/experience can be imparted elsewhere) to “overhaul” their education systems in order to meet the requirements of an increasingly competitive world, on the one hand, and, on the other, to make full use of the potential of their young population.

It may be of interest to note that the changes envisaged for the curriculum are placed in line with some other equally important aspects, of which:

- incentives,
- public accountability,
- labour market reforms.

The above should be seen, we believe, as *challenges* each country has to face in order to survive the growth of globalization. It is then the role of education to deliver the new skills, since, as pointed out in the study quoted, “education is the main source of knowledge creation”. To become competitive, a person must shift from routine tasks towards those soft skills which are critical in increasing productivity.

This trend has become apparent and is in process, but countries should be urged to accelerate the process in order to remain competitive. The demand will be in the future more for soft skills than for hard skills, as the latter can be more easily off shored. “There are countless Indians or Chinese who can write software as well as an Englishman, and cheaper... but there are much fewer who can write good English or sell a house” – according to [6].

It is recommendable, we believe, that employees should get training in order to become familiar with the societal characteristics and professional etiquette of the countries in which they operate. As Desai [1] points out, there is a ‘massive and expensive skills gap ... and companies are at an inflection point’.

It is then obvious why action taken in order to bridge that gap should put together the efforts of forward-thinking business executives, human resources professionals and learning leaders, who must identify fast and efficient modes of addressing these training needs.

At the centre of soft abilities development Desai [1] places *English communication skills* as an essential soft skill for global business, as “presentation, negotiation, empathy, problem solving – all depend on language and cultural proficiency”.

The key questions that training officials should answer are:

(a) *How frequently, for what purpose and in what language will your employees communicate with one another, suppliers and customers?*

(b) *What teams and divisions will work across borders and for what purpose? What benefits will that provide?*

(c) *If employees can’t communicate effectively with global customers, suppliers, partners or other employees, how will that impact operational effectiveness?*

(d) *Does your next generation of leaders have the business communication skills it needs to successfully manage your organization?*

(e) *How will you address the language barriers in your organization? What are the costs if you don’t?*

We have mentioned these questions as we adhere to the idea that they represent *guideposts* in designing a *soft skills training oriented curricular change in tertiary education*.

One can note that both well developed states, such as the USA, Japan, the countries of the EU, but also China, India or Brazil are currently drawing up alternative scenarios of social, economic and technological development, anticipating the directions of change that will have an impact on the educational institutions and services. It is certainly worth warning about the risks of disregarding obstacles, unpredictable changes and so on in generating soft skills development policies.

At what may be considered somehow the opposite pole, in terms of economic position and education system development, the American researcher Rifkin [5] is (already!) concerned with the lack of specific soft skills at managerial echelon, “despite nearly two decades of corporate globalization efforts”.

The main skill discussed (or rather its absence – we should point out) is a lack of cultural awareness when dealing with employees and partners overseas, as well as a lack of experience managing increasingly complex processes over long distances. The author discusses the reasons why it is not easy to develop soft skills, linking them mainly to the uniqueness of each environment in the general globalizing tapestry at world level, while pointing out that companies should investigate the steps to be taken in order to improve this situation.

We have tried to portray, although quite sketchily, the current society, characterized by the dominance of globalization, which has had a strong impact on the type of skills required from the workforce – the focus has moved from the strictly professional ones, named *hard skills*, towards those of the (inter)personal, communication connected ones – labeled *soft skills*.

Most voices from the contemporary society economic, political and social areas expect that training in this area should become the responsibility of education, at all levels. Hence, we believe, a higher degree of responsibility for the players in higher education, who will have to remould the curricula to accommodate these views.

2. Expected response - necessary reshaping of the curricular focus

It has become crucial for our higher education to provide the graduates with a high level of proficiency in such skills, which are critical to their future careers.

Still, there are universities in our country that grant disproportionate priority to the professional competence development, on the grounds that it is the main criterion in deciding upon success in one’s professional career today, while we are advocating that, beside the necessary professional knowledge, it is the *soft skills* that matter almost to an equal extent at the workplace nowadays, making an applicant more eligible, thus distinguishing them from the other ones with the same/equivalent professional qualification.

There is a tendency in our globalized market that the demand for hard skills is decreasing in relationship to the demand for soft skills. This phenomenon can be explained, we think, by the fact that hard skills can be outsourced more easily, while the soft skills gap requires more intense effort and costs to bridge.

In order to ensure the mobility of the workforce and the chance to perform optimally in multinationals, our tertiary education system should be essentially re-configured in order to deliver new skills, able to provide support to the learners who will be trying to explore career prospects of a more globally oriented type.

We should not disregard the very fact that the targeted human beings are young people, still learning in lecture halls, open to acquiring new sets of basic and transversal competencies that should give them the opportunity and chance of a workplace on the competitive market, so difficult to predict lately, as far as its quality standards are concerned.

The newly created context at (inter)national level is not yet sustainable enough – we believe – from the point of view of the values attached to globality, or from that of facing inherent risks and obstructions that are difficult to predict entirely. Such contexts demand a new form of educational management, which should interact dynamically with the new strategic self-management, in order to reshape standards and models in the newly created conditions, whose development can sometimes be quite unpredictable. This does not automatically ensure success, as the competitors' conduct in the international market is itself difficult to predict.

There are - and there will continue to be - tensions at world level, that refer to the relationships between income and profit, stable workplaces and the dynamic of human resources and of the capital, developing advanced competencies transparently and keeping the secrets of know-how while staying competitive. We have identified numerous examples in this respect. Thus, Ravindran [4] provides an analysis of the globalization of engineering (which is the specific area of our research interest), pointing out some of its major causes:

- the migration of engineers worldwide,
- the natural effects of what has been called the New World Order,
- the emergence and extension of multinational corporations, as well as of national corporations with facilities (for design, manufacturing, research and development in foreign countries),
- rapid e-based communications, conducive to economy and increased profit.

Hence, the common feature at tertiary education level is the need for engineering education focused on:

- innovation,
- communication,
- entrepreneurship,
- involvement in public policy issues.

Emphasis should be placed therefore on both core competency and transferable skills.

On the list of soft skills required, for instance to immigrant engineers in Canada, he includes:

- communication and business etiquette (basic need),
- knowledge of the diversity of Canadian population and cultural factors,
- impact of immigrant labour,
- knowledge of appropriate standards and labour laws in the working environment.

Conversely, the soft skills that the Canadian engineers should possess in order to perform successfully at international scale cover:

- cultural and linguistic aspects,
- regional/local issues,
- geo/political/historical issues,
- business issues and conflicts.

What Ravindran [4] advocates is an *integrated curriculum*, covering, beside basic sciences and engineering core courses, a selection of optional courses which should include entrepreneurship, engineering economics, ethics and law, environmental issues in a national and global context, international business. Similarly, the so-called liberal arts courses should cover communication, society, culture and history, international history, culture, and sensitivities.

As a whole, a cross-section through the engineering curriculum that should support students to face the demands of the globalization period would reveal a strong foundation in basic sciences but also good communication skills, thus enabling the young engineers to be “innovative, entrepreneurial and global”.

This is just one example of the approach to redesigning curricula in order to include the teaching and learning of soft skills as one of the major objectives of higher education institutions. This, as many other positive experiences worldwide should be taken into consideration, with the necessary changes dictated by a comprehensive evaluation of the concrete context features, by university policy makers in our country.

3. Implementing change – an example and open conclusions

The soft skills that should be included, in our opinion, in the tertiary education curriculum widely range from language and communication abilities, through personal development and managerial one up to cultural sensitivity and work ethics.

It should be our purpose as trainers to form a generation that should be very confident in operating in a global environment. The European educational policies should take into consideration priorities such as designing new strategies and methods of teaching/learning, making better use of ITC means, training teachers and teacher trainers in acquiring the necessary pedagogic, scientific and, not less important, digital competences, facilitating access to the electronic educational programs and so on.

We claim that the role of language teachers in non-philological universities, in our concrete educational context - a technical university, should go beyond the teaching of language courses, or even ESP ones.

We advocate the idea that a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) type of soft skills focused course in a foreign language can be a good option at both bachelor and master levels in a technical university.

The advantages of such an option are multiple, especially where the learners' level of foreign language proficiency allows for such a course to be fully internalized by the students.

By integrating the main learning material, focused on a soft skill, into the language course, the time costs and effort are diminished, flexibility and modularity of the approach in accordance with the students' needs are allowed, and the learning process is based on realistic and frequently authentic input, which enhances the students' motivation and determination.

In what follows, an example is provided of one possible manner of designing and teaching an original soft skills focused course, authored by a teacher of English and delivered to engineering students at both master and doctoral levels.

It is only a first attempt of the author to go beyond the teaching of the already 'traditional' communicative approach based ESP courses, towards a CLIL type of course, which has required reconsideration of the methodological approach and selection criteria for the input. The course, with a dual focus - on language *and* content - is an *English for Scientific and Technical Communication (STCE)* course. It has been designed by the author of this study and taught at the master level of the Bucharest Polytechnic.

It is a three-part material, whose modularity allows for options dictated by the concrete learners' profile and by the results of negotiation with the course director and the main stakeholders.

The course is presented on electronic support, as well as in a printed version (Yolanda-Mirela Catelly, *Scientific and Technical Communication in English – Course Slides*, Printech Publishing House, CNCSIS Code 54, ISBN 978-606-521-359-3, 256 pp., Bucharest, 2009), with applications and assignments.

The course comprises three main parts, preceded by an introductory part on communication:

- ACCURACY OF LINGUISTIC SUPPORT;
- WRITTEN COMMUNICATION;
- ORAL COMMUNICATION.

The STCE course is conceived with a dual orientation, with focus both on the *process* and on the *product*. The *content* reflects the main requirements for the newly employed graduate of a technical university, as they have emerged from a sound and detailed needs analysis.

The modular structure permits the teacher to remain flexible in the approach and select only those elements that are of direct interest for the trainees in each educational context where the course is delivered.

However, the main focus remains that of providing the future engineers with the necessary skills that would help them to perform competitively in jobs at (inter)national level.

One of the main aims of the course book is that of providing support to the students, for whom English is generally a foreign language, by developing the skills and competences required in their academic activity and, later on, in the professional one in technical working environments such as multinational corporations at a quite high level of language proficiency, equivalent to C1 (Competent User), according to the Common European Frame of Reference – CEFR.

The selection of topics and the examples provided, as well as the activities in the applications, are designed with a view to refining the trainees' level of English specific to their domain of professional interest.

The course input covers both theoretical and practical aspects, including communication situations specific to science and technology, introduced in a logical and chronological sequence, from conception and design, through developing structures, and up to analysis, applications and reporting scientific research.

Another major objective of the course is that of helping the students to build up their organizational skills, as well as their communication strategies, in order to develop a strategic framework able to support them at the post course stage to continue to develop their professional oral and written communication abilities *autonomously*.

The *language* focused module should be seen as a necessary form of support in view of attaining a high level of accuracy in communication. Both morphology and syntax key aspects are presented as 'cards', to help the learners become aware of the most typical/frequent mistakes.

The part on *written communication* covers the so-called 'tools of the trade' – paragraph structure, elements of style, register and level of formality. These are followed by the modes of written expression mostly used in scientific and technical communication, e.g. descriptive, expository, narrative and, chiefly, scientific. A discussion regarding ways of avoiding biased language is included. The *process* of writing is then presented and a collection of the most frequently used types of texts in scientific and technical communication is provided. Their structure is analyzed and the learners are guided throughout the process by means of checklists of steps and tips on good practice.

The third part is a module on *oral communication* specific to scientific and technical contexts. It is focused on presenting and developing the necessary portfolio of skills that are required from a professional who is supposed to take part in scientific and technical discussions or to make oral presentations. The main communication strategies and functions of the language, for instance negotiating, evaluating or synthesizing, are studied. Particular interest is given to non verbal communication, as well as to increasing the students' awareness of the particularities of international multicultural working environments.

It is the author's intention to expand the experience towards designing further soft skills oriented modular courses, in order to cover the portfolio required today on the globalized market of engineering jobs.

We do hope that this could be conducive to generating many transferable skills and an improvement to the human capital dynamics in order to attain success in a truly global context.

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