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THE 21ST CENTURY SKILLS AND LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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Abstract:

The paper focuses on the role of language education in increasing the graduates' chances for better employment. This often means to have access to the global labour market and comply with the requirements of the jobs available. The modern workplace requires employees to have cognitive and affective skills that can help them to adapt fast to changing work conditions, to solve difficult problems and make suitable decisions. They are also expected to have complex communication skills so that to interact successfully with people from different cultures. How much of this language training can do, in a period of financial constraints and changing educational policies, is an issue to be developed in the paper.

Keywords: language, education, skills, employability, workplace, 21st century.

INTRODUCTION

The complexity of modern society, the fast-changing global economic context, the high level of competition in almost all fields of activity and the prolonged economic crisis create a very specific environment for the young generation's professional development. On the one hand, the development of technology will continue to eliminate some job categories. On the other hand, the jobs that cannot be automated will require more specific skills such as ability to negotiate, to persuade, to interact successfully with other people, to create, to innovate. These jobs are rather connected with knowledge management, critical thinking, ethical reasoning, problem solving and innovation. Besides, people competing for these jobs will also have to prove that they can work both autonomously and in teams, can monitor themselves well and are self-motivating. Consequently, effectiveness at the workplace will depend, among other things, on the individual's ability to adapt to new work environments and to communicate effectively with people having different cultural backgrounds.

It is generally recognized that the modern workplace requires employees to have broad cognitive and affective skills that are often referred to as the "21st century skills". As research shows [1] five of these skills seem to be particularly important: adaptability, complex communication skills, non-routine problem-solving skills, self-management/self-development and systems thinking. Reports from the labour market researchers and the business community point out that such skills are highly valued by employers. Starting from this point, researchers have tried to establish whether the 21st century skills are reflected in the individual or societal well-being, if there are effective models to teach them through the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education and if they can be assessed and how assessment can be done [2].

In this context, it is clear that education, especially at high school level and higher education have to direct their strategies towards developing these particular skills in order to prepare the students for the modern workplace and increase their chances for employability.

1. PREPARING STUDENTS FOR EMPLOYMENT

1.1 Education research and the labour market

Labour market has always been marked by instability and its signals influenced both the dynamics of the society and the quality of its citizens' life. Its dynamics follows closely the changes of the economic environment as a whole. From this point of view, Kay and Greenhill (2011) [3] make a synthetic and convincing picture of the present work environment: "Technological and economic changes mean that companies have changed how they are organized and the way they do business. Workers have more responsibility and contribute more to productivity and innovation.

In response to economic changes, industries and firms have made significant organizational and behavioural shifts, such as flatter management structures, decentralized decision making, information sharing, and the use of task teams, cross-organizational networking, just-in-time inventory, and flexible work arrangements, according to several studies that have documented these changes. These shifts often are associated with increased productivity and innovation." [3, p.45].

Caught in the game of demand and supply on the labour market, potential employees have to do whatever necessary to become attractive to employers.

The question about the skills people need in order to become attractive to employers and perform well on the job concerned not only employees but also researchers. Some studies, carried out by Autor, Levy and Murnane[4] and Murnane and Levy [5], started from four categories of tasks (cognitive, routine, expert thinking and complex communication tasks) that people have to perform on various jobs. On the basis of the percentage of available jobs, they have tracked the trends over a period of 30 years (1969 - 2009). The conclusion of their research is that expert thinking and complex communication are clearly tasks increasingly required by employers.

Murnane continued to explore the components of expert thinking and complex communication with a view to establishing a clearer set of abilities that most important in performing various jobs.

According to his findings, expert thinking is involved in modern jobs by components that can be described as deep understanding of the domain and of its internal relationships, ability to recognize patterns, ability to monitor your own problem solving (metacognition) and ability to take initiative.

As far as complex communication is concerned, it includes:

- observing and listening
- eliciting critical information
- interpreting the information
- conveying the interpretation to others. [2, p.9]

As shown in [2], in his presentation on the 2011 workshop of the National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academy of Sciences, USA, Richard Murnane maintains the same direction of approach with regard to skills as in his previous studies. He focuses on the relationships between the 21st century skills and the labour market outcomes. He is absolutely right in stating that labour market research may provide strong evidence about the importance of these skills. He is also right when argues that the 21st century skills cannot be associated with the modern workplace only. Indeed, understanding and dealing correctly and successfully with the major problems of modern society (proliferation of nuclear weapons, global warming, economic crisis, immigration etc.) requires well-educated people, highly-skilled in expert thinking and complex communication.

The connection between these skills and certain aspects of professional success is revealed by another recent study [5] whose authors, Lindqvist and Westman (2011) examined the relationships between cognitive and noncognitive skills and labour market outcomes. The noncognitive skills that the two authors had in view included:

- willingness to assume responsibility
- independence
- outgoing character
- persistence
- emotional stability
- initiative
- social skills. [2, p.10]

The results of the study indicate that noncognitive skills may be important predictive factors for wages, employment status and annual earnings. The study was carried out in Sweden on a large sample of 18-year-old men enlisted in the country's military. It is really interesting that, according to the study results, men with higher scores for noncognitive skills had shorter periods of unemployment, while cognitive ability had no statistically significant effect on the duration of unemployment. This result is in accordance with what Deborah Boisvert, a researcher with the Boston Advanced Technological Education Connection (BATEC), referred to within the 2011

workshop of NRC.

In a survey conducted by BATEC in 2007 and designed to identify the skills employers use to seek in their employees, the skills rated highly by the survey respondents were largely similar to the noncognitive skills considered by Lindqvist and Westman [2, p.10]:

- communication skills (oral and written)
- ability to work productively in teams and groups (teamwork skills)
- customer and business focus (understanding the big picture)
- ability to listen for meaning and comprehension
- ability to prioritize work and self-evaluate (self-reflection and time management)
- development of original solutions to novel problems (problem solving)
- ability to lead and act responsibly (leadership and ethics)

As shown in [2, p.10], in the survey follow-up interviews, respondents emphasized the same idea pointed out by Lindqvist and Westman: “while technical skills may help someone get an interview, it is the soft skills [such as those listed above] that get the person the job”.

As research on the demand-side of the labour market has shown, people looking for a job nowadays will be evaluated from the perspective of the 21st century skills acquisition. Though the respective set includes five main skills, deep examination reveals that larger sets of skills are involved since the basic set is, in fact, made up of three clusters of skills: cognitive skills (nonroutine problem solving, critical thinking, systems thinking); interpersonal skills (complex communication, social skills, team work, cultural sensitivity, dealing with diversity); intrapersonal skills (self-management, time management, self-development, self regulation, adaptability, executive functioning). [2, p. 2]

When and how can someone acquire such skills? The answer to this question points, as expected, to education. The complex range of skills required for professional fulfilment nowadays should be the main objective of any educational process. Forward-looking educational strategies are based on curricula and syllabi that strongly reflect the above skills since education is essentially connected with the needs of society. Our modern society, both at local and global level, has passed and is still passing through serious changes. Besides the things I have referred to in the Introduction to this paper, the modern society is faced with numerous economic, political, health, scientific, technological and environmental challenges. At the same time, marketplaces themselves are, as always, “a world of opportunities and risks” [3]. Today’s students have to be prepared such a way as to be able to face all these challenges, to find their way in life, to fulfil themselves professionally and to manage with the consequences of their civic and professional engagements. This is why education has to keep pace with all these changes, to foresee the hidden ones and adapt its programmes so that to form and develop the right workforce for the type of economy it will be engaged in. Education is also responsible for the type of citizens our society will have and for the quality of the world they will have to live in.

Referring to present challenges to American education, Kay and Greenhill [3, p.42] state: “We must recognize that a 21st century education forms the bedrock of our society and serves as the critical engine of our nation’s success. As former West Virginia Governor Bob Wise has (wisely) said, “education is the new currency” for our economic recovery.”

I think that education has always been a strong currency and a “critical engine” of any nation’s success. It depends on the policy makers to make the engine work.

Therefore, Kay and Greenhill (2011) are totally right in stating that the whole educational mechanism should move in the direction of fostering the 21st century skills: “We need to act accordingly: Every aspect of our education system-standards, assessments, professional development, curriculum and instruction, and learning environments - must be aligned to prepare citizens with the 21st century skills needed to succeed in work and life. Skills like critical thinking, problem solving, communication, collaboration, creativity, and innovation should be integrated more explicitly into *every* child’s education (...).” [3, p.42]

1.2 Language education and the 21st century skills

On examining the 21st century skills set, one can notice that complex communication is one of the five skills. Various papers on this subject emphasize the necessity of additional educational effort to increase the level of students’ communicative competence. In support of a new educational strategy directed towards developing communication skills, Kay and Greenhill (2011) argue : “Communicating and collaborating with teams of people across cultural, geographic, and language boundaries (is) - a necessity in diverse and multinational workplaces and communities. Mutually beneficial relationships are a central undercurrent to accomplishments in businesses - and it is not only top managers who represent companies anymore.”[3, p. 46].

Though “the 21st century skills” is equally a concept, an objective and a target of the American education system reform, I think that teachers, students and parents in any other part of the world should consider it seriously if they are thinking deeply of the challenges of the century that has just begun. Language teachers, at all levels, should adapt their teaching objectives to the requirements of the modern workplace by revising their syllabi, teaching methods and textbooks, so as to give priority to the required skills. Skills like critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork, collaboration, independence, responsibility, culture awareness and cross-cultural competence can be well taught and developed in language classes. They can be wisely associated with skills that are intrinsic to language learning such as observing and listening, eliciting critical information, interpreting the information and conveying the interpretation to others both orally and in writing.

Teaching modern languages to students of Economics from the perspective of the 21st century skills means to train young people to sell goods and services well, to present them attractively to potential buyers, to analyze business proposals, to evaluate reports, to write good e-mails, business letters and contract clauses, to negotiate various business issues, to pass through a job interview, to deal with cultural differences etc.

The outcomes of language education depend inevitably on certain factors such as:

- suitable teaching/learning environments
- adequate curricula and syllabi
- suitable teaching methods
- specific equipment for teaching/learning languages
- quality of textbooks and of other supportive materials
- motivated teachers
- motivated students.

Some of these factors are directly controlled by language teachers, others are not. Language teachers are directly involved in setting up the syllabi, writing and selecting the materials they are going to use over a certain academic period of time,

adapting the teaching methods to new objectives, motivating their students. As far as the education infrastructure is concerned, language teachers cannot do much. Therefore, the funding of new educational plans and strategies may be a serious problem, especially in a period of economic downturn. Motivated teachers and students can work wonderfully even in bad economic conditions but not for long. Therefore, local makers of educational policies and the government should be aware of the present needs of our educational system.

CONCLUSION

This paper is less an in-depth analysis of some concrete ways of embedding the 21st century skills in the reform of the Romanian education system, but rather an attempt to put forward some of the present challenges to teachers.

Since language teachers are responsible for developing the students' communicative competence, one of the skills that are considered the "heart and soul" of the 21st century framework for learning, part of the paper focused more on this area of education.

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