

A FRAMEWORK OF ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMPETENCIES IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND INTEGRATING STUDENTS ON THE LABOUR MARKET

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ABSTRACT

The basis of this study lies in the importance which should be given to developing language competence in teaching English as a foreign language in the contemporary educational and economic context. From the three levels on which curriculum change for this purpose occurs (individual, group, and organizational) we will concentrate on the organizational factors which influence labour market integration of future graduates of English. Using the results of content analysis and of a questionnaire we develop a pedagogical approach to understanding the steps which should be taken in building a coherent strategy for the development of language competence with a view to performing an efficient integration of graduates on the labour market.

Keywords: Competence, education, labour market, teaching language

From school to work – a graduate's complete journey

In the contemporary age the economic, demographic and social demands have dictated a reconsideration of the educational system in terms of relevance, efficiency and finality. In more pragmatic terms the process of education itself started being regarded as a process which had to prove its profitability materialized in the quality of the students it prepares and inserts as professionals on the labour market. Thus, be it at European or at a national level, various programmes were designed with specially formulated provisions whose implementation would provide a closing of the educational loop transmission of knowledge–application of knowledge–shaping of individuals/ forming of professionals–evaluation–integration on the labour market. Acts such as the Lisbon Agenda (2000) introduce the concept of knowledge-based economy and society so as to meet the challenges of the new age and ensure a competitive collaboration for the benefit of the entire European Union through the implementation of “a challenging programme for building knowledge infrastructures, enhancing innovation and economic reform, and modernizing social welfare and education systems”. We regard these coordinates as outlining the main directions for the promoting of what could be called sustainable educational development. Borrowing the syntagm from environmental studies we see the coordinates of this programme as following three main directions – education, society, economy – in an undertaking of developing a synergistic development of the three. The Romanian system of education has always been open and eager to align to the European requirements, but the difficulty lies not in the openness to new and in adopting the innovative methods and techniques, but in achieving a round, unitary process of education, which has to be efficient as well as pleasant, pragmatic as well as creative. With strict reference to the domain of teaching English as a foreign language we consider that the real

challenge lies not in preparing specialists for the specific fields (teaching, interpretation, language consultants), but in forming these skills in such a way so as to be used in other fields of employment. We introduce this aspect because the realities of the employment market (and our study as well) have demonstrated that more often than not graduates come to work in fields adjacent to the ones they have been prepared for (the “routes” introduced by OECD, 2000). Our inquiry focuses on graduates of the faculty of letters and the results will render the fact that an important percentage have been employed in fields sometimes close to and other times quite far from the area of teaching languages that they have been trained for.

Our study aims at outlining a model that will complete the process of education which we regard as the loop that has to be closed, a loop which is based on the following three pillars involved in the process of education and starts from the principle of interrelatedness between them: the *actors* involved in the process of education at one level or another (from the individual – student/ teacher/ manager to the community – parents/ potential employers and up to the decisional bodies – government and legislators); the aspect of *competence* as the fulcrum on which such a model for efficient education will be designed; the *potential for professional development* ensured by such a competence-based context viewed from the split perspective of the teachers’ potential for professional development and that of the students’/ graduates’ possibility to be later efficiently integrated on the labour market.

Competence development – the main link of the chain academic education–professional training/ development/ insertion

In the context of “the new Europe”, the third millennium brought the drafting of important documents (the Bologna Declaration, 2000; the Lisbon Agenda, 2010; EC – Youth Employment Measures, 2010) that had one declared purpose of developing the future intelligence, creativity and innovative power of the Union. The new axis of all of these was the creation of a direct, effective and pragmatic link between school, economy and society making a clear move from transmission of abstract, theoretical knowledge to applied and pragmatic knowledge. Thus, the entire process of education was rethought taking now as a basis and declared finality the employability of the graduates. Academic education passed beyond being seen on the surface as the transmission of knowledge and moved towards being seen as an in depth process of employability of graduates, the stress being laid on training skills, competencies and qualifications for employment and integration of graduates, for achieving their professional development in terms of performance, efficiency and competitiveness (Biemans, 2004, 524, Furlong, 2001, 118).

With strict reference to teachers’ professional development, for the achieving of such a desideratum the following layers were considered: teacher effectiveness, teaching effectiveness, school effects of teachers as members of professional learning, characteristics of national educational system (EU, 2010, 20). The process is therefore taken from the individual to the entire system in an undertaking of considering individual characteristics as well as systemic features at national or European level. At the same

time, professional development is seen starting with the graduate level in the stage of initial training, continuing with the induction courses and in-service training and ending with continuous professional development in school settings (id., 19). This is why we, too, regard the process of professional development of teachers under the imperative of introducing its basic requirements to the graduate and making him/ her aware of the status that (s)he has a (potential) future employee in a pre-established (specific or general) field. We consider that a successful teaching act has to be result oriented not only targetted towards the acquisition of knowledge but also towards forming professionals who will be efficiently integrated on the labour market an aspect which has to become the guiding principle not only of teachers, but of graduates as well in a process of self-learning, self-orientation/ direction.

A scale of developing competencies with a view to labour market integration

This is the reason for which the entire process of education has to be (and in some cases has been) reshaped and taken from the subject of education with his/ her individual features which are now encouraged, cultivated and led to them being circumscribed to the ultimate purpose of achieving performance not only in the stage of knowledge-driven education, but also later in the practical stage of applying knowledge and using competencies in a job. When referring strictly to the academic education the imperatives are so much more obvious as this is the final, necessary step towards professional integration. The trajectory/ educational scale we regard as an imperative in developing education with a finality-oriented purpose is the following:

Though the studies on professional development (Campbell, 2004; Kyriakides, 2009) give the student as the first step in developing education, with any aspect we might focus on, we consider that *parents* are actually the first counselors. From among the lot of graduates we enquired 47% confirmed that it was the parents that guided or at least influenced their field for the academic education with a view to later obtaining a job. This however represents a lucky option in comparison to the 33% that confirmed that it was chance that led them to the choice of one or another faculty. Therefore we consider parents as the first pillar in career orientation and this is the reason for which the university and the employers should establish a close collaboration with them with a view to providing this first-hand counseling as best as possibly.

The, we consider that a realistic process of education at the academic level continues with the act of inducing in *students* the idea that as future graduates their main concern will be related to employability. Thus they have to constantly perform a conscious development of knowledge, skills, abilities, competencies on the all pervading background of the economic conditions, labour market requirements. This pragmatic view, also including secondary factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, flexibility, openness to new and power of adaptation has to constantly allow for personal development in terms of creativity, originality and uniqueness.

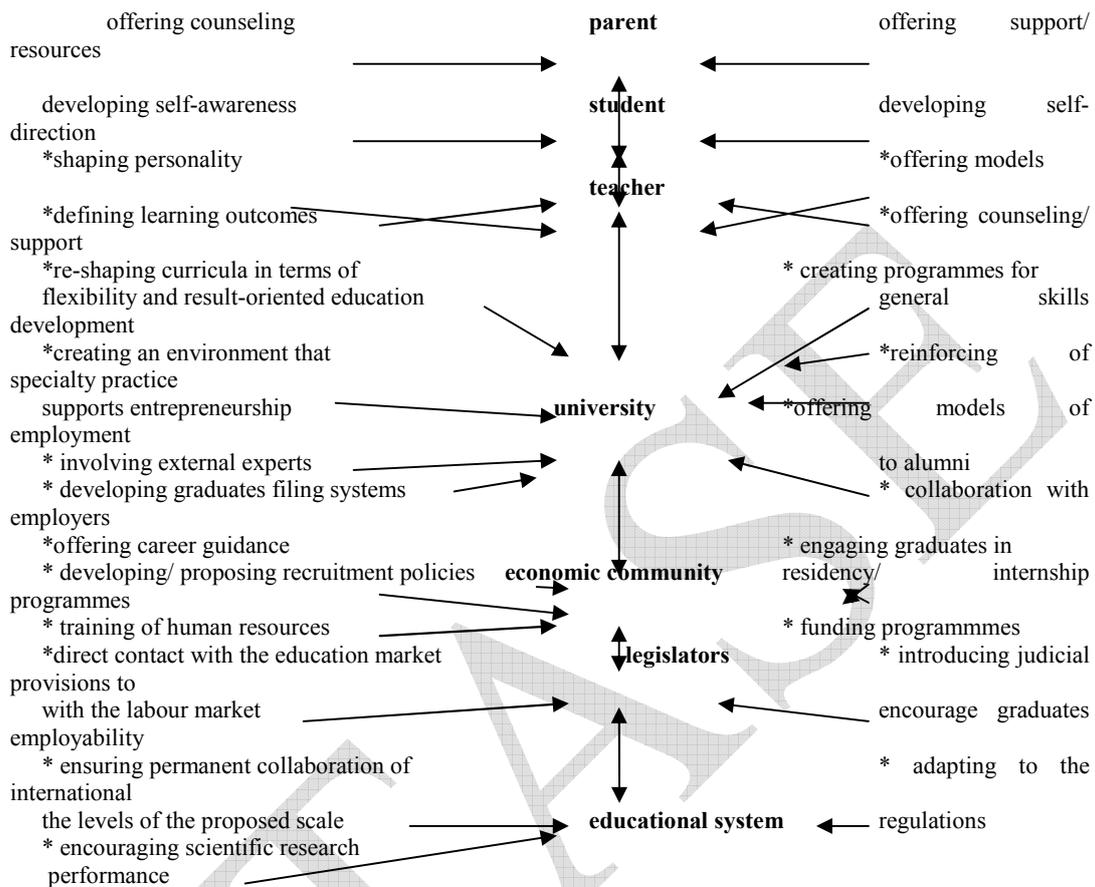


Figure 1. A scale of developing competencies with a view to labour market integration

At the level of the *teacher* performing the process of education, training has to be permanently driven by the act of instilling in the student the idea of self-learning from which the power of adaptation to any future context derives as well as that of their becoming the teachers' future peers (in the teaching profession or in any other profession). By being made aware that the act of learning at this stage will become the act of putting into practice within a profession and even perhaps in teaching others, students will perform a role-play projection which will allow them to become responsible and actively engaged in decision-making even at this stage. This view of the importance of the link between teacher behaviour and student achievement has grown more and more important and thus what are called the "process-product studies" were developed with the main goal of developing a series of fundamental variables of the teacher behavior among which: clarity, flexibility, enthusiasm, task related and/ or business like behaviour, criticism, indirect activity, providing students with an opportunity to learn criterion material, making use of stimulating comments, varying the level (EU, 2010, 24). With strict reference to forming more effective teachers these competencies were extended towards: commitment,

confidence, trustworthiness, respect, analytical and conceptual thinking, drive for improvement, information-seeking, initiative, flexibility, accountability, passion for learning (Anderson, 2004, 21). Other research introduces five main competencies: mastery of your own field or discipline, ability to perform well under pressure, ability to use time efficiently, ability to work productively with others, ability to use computers and the internet (Allen & van der Velden, 2009, 89).

The important aspect about the competencies in this series is that they are not restricted to teaching a particular subject and, in fact, are not restricted to the teaching profession only, but they can just as easily be applied to forming a professional in any field. At the level of the *university* we insist upon the importance of reshaping curricula in such a way so that the connection between abstract knowledge, practical skills and professional insertion be achieved taking into consideration the demands of the labour market and the graduates' interests. Thus, by its decisional independence in designing curricula and syllabi, the university should be able to integrate its graduates on the labour market successfully and efficiently if it monitors the annual degrees of insertion, fields of (re-)orientation and leveling of competencies.

With strict reference to the graduates of English it should be observed that professional development does not include insertion only in the field of teaching languages, but also translation and interpretation, journalism, communication, politics, language research, etc. Other times (as it is the case of 43% of our inquired lot) they come to work even as sales managers, shop assistants, accountants, drivers, police officers, call centre operators, assistant managers, clerk, social workers, NGO fund raisers, etc. All of these require not only the basic theoretical knowledge but also competencies of interpersonal communication, creativity, etc. which need to be developed during academic studies in a conscious process. That is why we distinguish between competencies *for* teaching (English as a foreign) language which comprises specific competencies for graduates who in turn intend to become teachers of (English) language, and competencies *in* teaching (English as a foreign) language which comprises other general competencies in case graduates reach to work an adjacent field in which they use their knowledge of (English) language.

Together with the development of economy graduates of foreign languages come, willingly or out of need for employment in jobs such as assistant manager, translator (of company documents), clerks, local administrative jobs, or, luckily, start their own business. Consequently, the *economic community* must be attracted at least to inform universities of their programmes and offer career guidance, or better yet create programmes of internship, fund university programmes and thus train and recruit its own human resource.

At the level of the *legislators*, numerous monitoring programmes must be initiated so to assess annually the degree of (professional) insertion of graduates on the labour market and observe the shortcomings and correct the flaws in a system of education which is not correlated with the social, economic context and the requirements of the labour market.

Framework of developing language competences with a view to integrating graduate on the labour market

In the model we intend to develop we insist upon the factors depending on the organization – the university – as the vital, independent link between the graduates' education and their future careers. The organization must have a sound, real knowledge of the (national and European) socio-professional context so as to form an efficient future professional. The literature specialty (Cordier, Ehlert, 2002, *apud* Pirciog et al, 2009, 76) has registered the existence of four models of transition from university to workplace: the Japanese model, the German model, the French model, and the American model. These advance from a simple view of a direct link between school education and labour to, respectively, a dual perspective of combining theoretical training with practical education, or, as a third option in the French model, initiating professional training in the very school in a formal environment, and finally a model which combines practical and theoretical training for all students, but is followed by other specialized courses with considerable costs. Starting from these models, countries attempt to implement one or another model, depending on their social realities and financial possibilities.

The common denominator is that systems of education move from the simple transmission of knowledge type of teaching and the monitoring of the ability to demonstrate knowledge type of learning to a more practical, active, collaborative educational process. Thus, stages as: setting instructional goals, planning, enacting strategies, teachers'/ students' shifting knowledge/ theory, monitoring, assessing (Schnellert, 2007, 727), with an insistence upon the variable of self-regulation; or the establishing of the basis of the educational act (which includes knowledge, skills, conceptions and attitudes, personal characteristics), followed by decision making and action taking having as consequences the emerging of learning processes, all in a specific context (Roelofs & Sanders, 2007, 125) all have as the ultimate purpose the reaching of measurable students', and ultimately graduates' achievements and gains.

Thus, studies on competence-based education/ competencies development (Prins et al, 2008, 141; Madhavaram, Laverie, 2010, 5–6; Ryegård, 2010, 15–17; Oser, Oelkers, 2001; Wesselink et al, 2007, 42) led us to the shaping of the following model of teaching languages with a view to integrating students on the labour market taking in mind the variety of fields they have the possibility to work in or are forced to work in. Such a model would ensure graduates' performance, efficiency, effectiveness, realistic evaluation, connection with the professional standards, qualification.

Table 1. Importance of competencies developed at organizational level in teaching languages

Factor	Competency	Percentage
social	developing power of adaptation to a context	36
economic	entrepreneurial and risk taking spirit of the manager/ managing team;	28 77

political	attracting businesses to invest in education;	23
administrative/ managerial	developing competencies for law proposals/ enforcement	85
	the recognition/ hiring of competent personnel;	65
	allotting funds dependant on study programmes and activities;	55
	engaging the campus community in joint programmes;	27
	clear establishing of hierarchies;	32
	clear delegation of power;	21
	ensuring protection from outside interference into the programme;	76
	creating programmes for within-university part time work;	79
	creating programmes for within university internship;	65
	assessing resources (financial, human temporal, etc.)	78
cultural	creating extracurricular opportunities for contact with other cultures;	34
	judicial	21
geographic	creating programmes for integration of members of other cultures;	33
	psychological	57
pedagogical	legal expertise	57
	reviving under-privileged regions	44
	establishing of a proper educational environment;	54
	collaboration with the family environment;	81
	encouraging (and monitoring) a work-group network;	85
	encouraging self-affirmation/ decision making/ initiatives;	87
	willingness to experiment/ openness to new;	76
	respecting autonomy/ intimacy;	80
	praising and encouraging;	62
	flexible decision making process; power of adaptation;	21
	encouraging team work and interdepartmental communication;	
	compulsory study of curriculum in pre-service teachers' training courses/ skills for research;	24
	documenting the existing and the improvised instructional strategies;	47
	preparation of teachers' guides and source-books and later training;	
	establishing a strategy (understanding of need, statement of purpose, defining objectives, establishing working procedures, realistic assessment and effective use of resources, calculating relative advantage, securing evaluation to assess effectiveness of the process);	34
technological	promoting integration and coordination of skills and subject areas;	21
	developing presentation skills (oral and written);	67
	raise students' awareness of discourse features;	65
	developing skills for systematization;	56
	developing critical thinking;	51
	educating assessment competencies;	45
	non-bureaucratic management;	57
encouraging non-formal discussions.	67	
encouraging greater use of ICT.	70	

The data analysis reveals quite a large difference between the high ratios concerning the field of language and discourse because of their humanistic formation, on the one hand and managerial, political or economic aspects which are further away from field of interest and area of research, on the other hand. Students see little relevance in developing power of adaptation to a context, entrepreneurial and risk taking spirit of the manager/ managing team, developing competencies for law proposals/ enforcement, ensuring protection from

outside interference into the programme, compulsory study of curriculum in pre-service teachers' training courses, or in promoting integration and coordination of skills and subject areas because they lack either practical thinking or integrative thinking of all the links in the chain of education. There are however high means in what innovative, experimental methods are concerned due to the specific desire for change of the youth and also in aspects connected directly to their specialization (language, discourse, didactics).

Conclusions

The conclusions that arise clearly from this study is that some vital aspects need to be considered for the development of a national education system able to efficiently achieve the process of socio-professional insertion of graduates on the labour market: interdisciplinary and even transdisciplinary approach to education and permanent dialogue between all actors appearing on the scale of education; focusing on the segment of young graduates and development of special policies; the creation of opportune psycho-social and encouragement of identity traits; the ensuring of a balance between qualitative and quantitative criteria. It is only in this manner that a functional link between education market (labour force supply) and labour market (employment demand of the business environment) will be ensured. And it is only in this manner that the shortcomings of young graduates insertion (lack of experience, and practical skills, instability within the labour market and a pattern for mobility due to salary conditions) will be overcome giving way to the advantages of such an insertion (potentially high productivity, adaptability and acceptance of novelty, up to date theoretical knowledge, relative cheap work force) and will put a stop to what are called the brain drain and the brain shopping phenomena (very pregnant on the Romanian market).

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