

TEACHING JOB INTERVIEWS

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Abstract

This is the third article of a series meant to provide important clues for less experienced instructors engaged in teaching the main oral communication situations in business English. It focuses on teaching job interviews and is divided into three main parts: What to teach? How to teach? How to assess? The article provides information about textbooks where instructors may find materials connected to teaching meetings to foreign students, as well as a scale, devised by the author, to assess students' oral productions in this specific speech situation.

Keywords: assessment scale, business English, job interview, teaching, textbook

This article continues the series in which I examine ways of teaching business communication situations included in the syllabus of the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies: the job interview. It follows the same pattern as the previous ones, namely it answers the questions: What to teach? How to teach? How to assess? It also mentions some resources for teachers, as well as an assessment scale specially devised for this particular situation.

What to Teach?

Most books dealing with job interviews target native speakers preparing for recruitment. Consequently, they deal with asking and answering questions and with body-language. Even business English textbooks including this topic do not thoroughly present the language to be used, but are mostly concerned with questions, answers, the phases of the interview and some advice for applicants.

On the other hand, the job interview is not taught alone. It is part of a larger unit called "Recruitment" which also includes the job advertisement, the CV and the letter of application. Students are first required to read and understand these documents, then to write letters and CVs based on advertisements provided in the textbook or by the teacher and, finally, to participate in an interview.

The interview itself involves two well-defined pragmatic roles: the interviewer and the applicant. Ideally, students should be trained to perform both roles. At the end, the class can be trained to select the best candidate.

A very simple job interview, including only a few questions about experience, skills, future plans and interests can be taught to *elementary* students (A.1.1 to A.2) using *Market Leader* (elementary). The exercise can be repeated several times until the students feel confident enough with this situation of communication.

Intermediate (B.1 to B.2) and advanced (C.1 to C.2) students preparing for the job interview need to be taught the following: language, structure, content, communication skills, voice and body language.

Language. The interviewer should be familiar with asking questions, making requests (*Tell me about yourself...*), dealing with questions, promising, asking for opinion.

The applicant should master functions such as: describing, narrating, promising, asking questions, stating opinion, agreeing, disagreeing, persuading, predicting. Both should also use basic functions such as greeting and closing the conversation. Grammar structures to be used include: verb tenses in all forms (positive, negative and interrogative), conditionals, modal verbs. Also, in order to cope with the real job interview, intermediate and advanced students need to be fluent in English.

Structure. Like any other professional verbal interaction, the job interview has a fixed structure. In this case, the structure includes the following steps: invitation to come in, greetings, questions asked by the interviewer, questions asked by the applicant, promise to get in touch, good byes. The structure of the job interview is presented in “New Insights into Business”, unit 2.

Content. Unlike the job interview and the meeting, where content was less or equally important as the language, the content of the job interview seems to take precedence over the linguistic skills. Content refers both to questions asked by the interviewer and to answers given by the applicant.

Questions. *International Business English* and *New International Business English* list twenty-four and, respectively, thirteen questions which can be asked during the job interview. Consulting various books meant for native speakers, I have compiled a list of the hundred most asked questions occurring in the British interview and the fifty most asked questions of the American interview, which can be found in the appendix to the textbook *L'embauche dans les multinationales. Deuxième partie: des savoir-faire*.

Besides this list, teachers and students can pick up clues about questions to be asked from *Intelligent Business* (intermediate). These include: follow-up questions, questions connected to the recruitment file (CV and letter of application), as well as short simulations in which, according to the job they apply for, candidates may be required to sell something (an ordinary pen or even the air surrounding them), to participate in a decision-making meeting or to solve a professional problem.

Answers. No textbook written for foreigners provides suitable answers to be given during the job interview. Students can find some clues in the listening activities included in *International Business English* and *New International Business English*. To properly coach them, the teacher needs to read books written for native speakers such as Eggert's *The Perfect Interview*.

Communication skills include:

Listening is tremendously important for both the interviewer, who needs to form an opinion about the candidate, and the applicant, who must be sure to give the proper answers.

Turn-taking means refraining from interrupting, especially by the applicant who is in the dominated position, and overlapping. If the interviewer wishes to see how the candidates react to stress, he/she may choose to interrupt them.

Attitude. The interviewer can decide to make the candidate uncomfortable so as to watch his/her reaction. However, true to British standards, interviewers need to remain polite and non-aggressive.

British applicants are taught to practice bragging which does not normally come easy to them. In my opinion, Romanian applicants, who tend to brag, should be taught to speak well about themselves without exaggerating. They should be aware of what "bragging" means in UL. Max Eggert suggests an exercise in this respect which could be done in class:

Make a list of: 5 achievements, or 5 skills, or 5 things you are good at, or 5 things you are proud of at work. Then invite a colleague to strike off, at random, two from your list of five. You then have five minutes to persuade your colleague that the two items should go back on the list. (Eggert, 1992: 30).

As the author says, all through the exercise, students should sound as if they were just talking about what they did. Moreover, Romanian candidates must be taught to remain calm and polite during the interview.

Cross-cultural skills. Students can go through job interviews in English if they wish to be recruited by companies of different nationalities, such as British, American, Dutch and Scandinavian. Before attending such an interview, they need to get acquainted with the cultural characteristics of job interviews in each of these countries (e.g. in the Netherlands, they must be modest and subdued and refrain from bragging).

The time allotted for the job interview in the university syllabus does not allow teachers to offer proper cultural training to their students. However, I think that an interesting and useful exercise would be to prepare them for recruitment by British and American companies. This involves teaching them to write CVs and resumes, British letters of application and American cover letters and to prepare for the

British and the American interviews. The main difference between the two cultures is attitude: the Americans tend to brag much more than the British. The motto of the American candidate is "I'm the best" and the applicant is supposed to turn every little success in his/her life into an "outstanding achievement". The motto of the British applicant is just "I'm the best for the job" and he/she is supposed to prove it.

Voice and body language constitute an area in which students need a lot of coaching. Their voice should not betray nervousness. Training in body-language includes dress, posture, gestures, legs and hands positions, eye contact, face and head (smiling, nodding) and several don'ts such as do not smoke, eat, chew gum, put your hands on the interviewer's desk. Teachers can find information about body-language in Eggert's book *The Perfect Interview*.

How to Teach?

Students of all levels, including advanced ones, should be taught in four steps:

- **raising awareness and observation;**
- **presenting** linguistic and communication skills, including body-language, as well as questions and sample answers;
- **practicing** questions and especially suitable answers provided by students and discussed by the teacher and the whole class;
- **production** of the job interview in which students play both the interviewers and the candidates.

It is also advisable to train the class to select the best candidate. An activity in this respect can be found in *New International Business English*.

How to Assess?

In my opinion, the most interesting way in which job interviews can be assessed is by assigning students a complex task called "recruitment". The teacher provides a job advertisement and the students are required to write (true or imaginary) CVs and letters of application for the respective job. These can be used to assess writing skills pertaining to recruitment. The teacher reads and grades the documents and nominates the team of interviewers and the applicants. There are two interviewers, one from the human resource department and one from the department advertising the vacancy, and four candidates. The interviewers are given the candidates' CVs and letters of application and prepare together the questions they wish to ask each candidate. The applicants, who are supposed to compete for the same job, prepare alone. After allowing enough time for preparation, the candidates are asked to leave the classroom. The interviewers call them in one by one and proceed to the interview. The teacher and the rest of the class take notes and refrain from

intervening. After having been interviewed, the candidates remain in the classroom. When all the interviews are over, the class, the interviewers and the teacher discuss the applicants' performance and the first two decide who should get the job. The marks the applicants get do not depend on whether they have got the job or not, but on their overall performance. The interviewers' performance is discussed by the class, the applicants and the teacher. To make it even more challenging, the activity can be done in two variants: the British recruitment and the American recruitment.

This procedure has several advantages:

- assessment consists of a task students are asked to perform;
- various aspects of recruitment can be assessed;
- the task is followed by genuine communication in the classroom;
- the task is motivating for the students.

As in my previous articles, I would like to suggest an analytical criterion-referenced scale to be used for the assessment of job interviews:

Criterion	5	4	3	2	1	Comments
1. <i>Language</i> -fluency -accuracy -appropriacy -range						
2. <i>Structure</i> -adequacy to genre -logical sequence -timing						
3. <i>Communication</i> -listening -turn-taking -attitude						
4. <i>Content</i> -clear aim -relevant questions -relevant answers -coherence						
5. <i>Voice and body-language</i> -pronunciation -intonation, stress, rhythm -eye-contact and face -gestures and posture						

The teachers may decide if they wish to require their students to dress properly for a job interview and, in this case, dress must be included in the "voice and body-language" criterion.

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