

THE USE OF MOCK JOB INTERVIEWS FOR FIRST-TIME JOB-SEEKERS IN COLLEGE SETTING

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Most institutions of tertiary education use various ways to prepare their students for the different stages of job-seeking. In spite of the fact that there are job fairs, career centres and the students can find advice on the Internet in the form of free CV clinic, tips by HR consultants and other experts, the students often lack self-confidence in real-life situations. At Budapest Business School an elective English language course, which has been running for more than five years, aims to prepare the students by taking them through the stages of job-hunting and as one of the most important factors. After thorough preparation, the course concludes in a mock interview providing the participants with the opportunity of practising and testing their interview skills thus reducing the interview anxiety which may come from several factors. The interviews are recorded; self - evaluation is requested and peer feedback is given. The article attempts to give a summary of the course, the process of preparing the students for the mock interview and, based on student feedback, the benefits of these job interviews.

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The job market

Finding a good job is more difficult than ever- the process may take as long as six months in the case of university and college graduates. Companies and recruitment agencies often receive hundreds of application letters before they even advertise a vacancy now, at a time of high unemployment. Many job-seekers, however, especially those who seek a first job or internship, are often unaware of the importance of a good CV that stands out, reflects the personality of the candidate, and they are even less aware of the fact that it is not only possible to prepare well for a job interview but it is also an expectation to be well-prepared.

This is especially typical of young, inexperienced job-seekers, but not solely – those considering a career change after a longer period of work also have to face similar problems.

The preparation is even more important in the case of interviews in foreign languages, which are often taken by foreign and Hungarian companies as well as by experts in the process of application for scholarships. Also, a high percentage of the students of Budapest Business School, College of Commerce, Catering and Tourism consider the opportunity of completing their industrial placement abroad as one of the greatest advantages of studying in this institution because in this way they

can get valuable experience in working in an international environment. Many students realize that employers look for fresh graduates with meaningful and useable work experience so they try to find prestigious places where they can learn on the job from acknowledged experts and they can put their theoretical knowledge into practice. Although most universities and colleges, including Budapest Business School, help the students find jobs by organizing job fairs and exhibitions, maintaining career centres and providing other professional assistance, there is usually little help available in rehearsing job interviews, tailoring the answers to the interview questions and getting feedback on the candidates' performance.

The language lessons could give room to such work, but unfortunately the low number of lessons does not allow enough time for detailed preparation. It is, however, the personalized approach the students look for.

The course

My personal experience with students who routinely approach language teachers for help to check and correct their CVs and motivation letters written in foreign languages after the language lessons (in my case in English) led me to the idea five years ago to launch a course which helps them prepare for the different stages of the job-seeking process. It is also clear, on the other hand, that many companies expect the candidates to take part in a long selection procedure even for non-managerial positions, with may involve psychometric testing, real-life tasks, role-play, etc., for which it is not possible to prepare the students in the frames of this course, but it still might provide help them to make a better first impression.

The course called *Career moves* is a non-mandatory skills development course in English language, it comprises a 90 minute period weekly, in a term of 15 weeks. The forms or work used in the lessons comprise multiple techniques: pair work, work in small groups, larger groups, presentations, role-play, discussions, individual research, etc.

The number of students used to be maximized at 18, now it is over thirty, which makes the work significantly more difficult and the personal approach hardly feasible. The course is usually chosen by students in their final year, those preparing for real-life job- interviews for industrial placement or summer jobs and students before or during the application period for scholarships or participation in exchange programs.

The course material (a set of sample CVs and motivation letters, articles, lists of tips, checklists, verb lists) has been compiled from different sources: the Internet, books and newspaper articles written by acknowledged HR experts, specialized publications, etc.

A number of sample interviews and other materials can also be found on the Internet which the students are recommended to view. The material is regularly updated as new articles or other relevant publications appear. Five years ago very few websites, books or other literature was available on the topic of job-seeking. Since then, however, numerous new publications have appeared both on the Hungarian and the international market, obviously as a response to the growing interest. The Internet is one of the major sources of sample CVs, motivation letters, interviews, interview tips and other materials. Relying too much on these samples, though, may lead to producing unimaginative, boring and not at all individual outcome.

The course requirement is to write various types of CVs from which the participants can later choose the most suitable one for their actual situation and which they can modify and upgrade with any additional information,

two kinds of motivation letters and finally to take part in a mock job interview, which is in most cases recorded and assessed by peers, the teacher and the students themselves.

Mock interviews, i.e. simulated job interviews are an integral part of the course at Budapest Business School. Many of the students, on hearing that a recorded interview is one of the course requirements, protest and try to shy out, few, however, are not willing to take part at the end of the preparatory period.

Before signing up for this course, many of these students have usually already taken part in courses in business communication in Hungarian or in English, where part of the course is to learn how to write CVs and motivation letters in theory and also hear about the right behaviour at job interviews but they have no opportunity to get feedback on their written or spoken performance. The topic of finding a job is also part of their business language studies, no matter what language they may learn, few of the students, however, realize that topic is not just another unit in the course book but something they can use later in their lives and careers. Most HR experts and authors on the topic, suggest that after careful preparation a mock job interview which is recorded, replayed and analyzed may also help the future applicants to reduce anxiety which might seriously deteriorate the performance of the interviewee in a real- life interview.

Some students may even have been to job interviews, they give invaluable help by telling the group about their personal experience, their feelings, fears and what they would now do differently, or why they think were successful in getting a job.

The work focuses on two major areas: content and form - the form includes both the behavioural and the linguistic aspects of the interview. Behaviour and manner has already been discussed, but the language is equally important: in stressful situations there is a tendency towards using very simple language, basic vocabulary and structures, in the interview; however, a higher standard is often required: logically, one of the aims of a job interview in a foreign language is to test the candidates' language skills. A special training is necessary to make the students use a richer vocabulary and more complex structures.

It would be useful to arrange two interviews- one before and one after the preparation to make the students realize how important it is to prepare, but because of the lack of time it has never been done.

The first impression

This anxiety may derive from a fear of the unknown, a previous failure, the lack of self-confidence and the unfamiliar social situation. Many students, mostly those who live in small villages or towns, leave their families to study in boarding schools for their secondary studies at the age of fourteen, and apart from their family and teachers they rarely meet other adults before they start a job.

The course follows a step-by-step approach, at every stage pointing to possible ways of development in the future. The preparatory phase focuses on the following points:

- Etiquette (how to dress, introduction)
- Identifying strengths and weaknesses
- Collecting relevant information
- Answering typical questions
- Answering tough questions
- Learning to avoid typical mistakes

The course begins with simultaneous preparation for the written work and the job interview. The students are requested to identify their strengths and weaknesses and find examples to support these. This creates a personal toolkit for the students to sell themselves on the job-market more effectively. It is always important to identify strengths as areas where the candidates need to develop and not as final, fossilized features of character. First the students are asked to collect a list of their strengths and weaknesses on their own, which they discuss in pairs and find examples to support them, this is followed by a mini-interview with changing partners in both roles, with me going round to monitor and find good and worse examples which we discuss and correct, choose a better wording, etc, and the activity concludes in each student telling about their most important features to the whole group. This approach helps the students overcome their anxiety and gives them self-confidence. Writing about strengths and weaknesses is an essential part of a meaningful motivation letter.

The students are required to find a job advertisement which is similar to the one they are likely to apply for later - or, if they are in the process of job-seeking, an advertisement for a job they actually would like to get and collect as much information about the company and the job as they can. The most important part of the preparation is looking at interview questions. There is a rich choice in the literature and on the Internet: some sources offer only a few commonly asked questions, some others more than a hundred. Some of them are listed in the Appendix.

Reading, comparing and analyzing these questions usually convinces the students that it is not at all impossible to prepare for a job interview- the questions, or at least some of them can be predicted. So can the structure of the interview, which, unless it is a stress interview with deliberately shocking elements, usually contains a few introductory questions followed by questions about the company, then about the candidates' personal work experience and goals with the aim of getting a picture of him/her, and the interview is closed with the interviewees' questions. The students in the lessons work on their personalized answers which they rehearse in smaller or larger groups.

Since then the development of technology has made it easier: recordings can be made with digital cameras, mobile phones and other commonly used tools.

Special emphasis is placed on techniques suggested for reducing stress and nervousness. Body language is also an important factor. Work in this field has shown that body language is responsible for 54% of the effectiveness of any face-to-face communication, whereas voice and tone for 39 %, and, surprisingly, content is for as little as 7%. Therefore, starting from the very first lesson, the students practice how to sit, use gestures, how to keep eye-contact or how to lean forward to show interest.

Before the interview

The students find a job advertisement they like – preferably one similar to the position they find likely for them to apply for, choose a CV and a motivation letter and bring them to class. They put on the clothes they would wear for the interview and come to class. The interviewing board consists of the teacher and a volunteering student from the group, another student records the interview, still another measures the time. Having different students on the 'board' ensures that the interviews are slightly different in style. Each interview takes 5-7 minutes. The interview – and the recording-

starts with the “candidate” entering the room and finishes with the final handshake. Should there be any students who refuse to be recorded, they are allowed to do the mock interview in the last lesson or at an agreed time without the whole group being present and being recorded. There have, however, been only a few cases when the students chose this option: seeing how useful the mock interview is and how supportive the group is, most of them have decided to go through it in the normal way. I myself have never experienced that the students would take the mock interview less seriously than a real one. On the contrary, putting on their best clothes, the students change into real candidates and act accordingly.

During the interview

The group takes notes on the following aspects:

- Content: validity of answers, spontaneity, focus,
- Language: clarity of answers, formality, turn-taking,
- Body language: handshake, posture, eye-contact, facial expressions, smile, posture, disturbing gestures, poise,
- Attitude: self- confidence, positive attitude, etc.

After the interview

There are two stages: immediately after the interview the students are asked about their feelings about and their attitudes to the interview. Most students say that they are first aware of their ‘audience’, the group of peers, but after a few seconds they can behave and act as in a real job interview. They report on more or less manageable interview anxiety but they say that the familiar environment and conditions help them overcome it. Most of them are afraid that their nervousness comes through; many refer to a feeling of relief and the most often heard sentence is: “It wasn’t as bad as I had expected”.

After this they are given feedback on their performance by their peers. In most cases, at the beginning many of the assessors give one-word opinions, but later as they see that the advice they give can be very useful and as everybody takes turn in being an interviewer, an interviewee and an assessor, the students take each role more and more seriously pointing out both the mistakes and the positive moments. They are specially asked to provide not only critical remarks but also advice, and to be helpful by giving reasons for their comments. The students are usually very good at this. They have never criticized their peers offensively, and as the time goes by, they are better and better, they take the task extremely seriously and do their best to help each other.

Follow-up

The students are given the opportunity to watch the recordings made of their performance either at the end of the course or in the lesson after the interview. As I myself take part in the process as an interviewer I and take notes as well, I am an active observer during the interview, but camera shows different things, therefore before viewing it with the student or with the whole group, I always watch it and make separate notes. Some students do not mind watching the recording with the rest of the group, some like to have the teacher or a few other students at hand and there are some who prefer to watch the recording on their own.

The students are offered to take home the recording for further study and some of them have used this opportunity - one of them even asked her parents to watch the recording. On one occasion a student failing to realize how important it was to prepare for the interview properly appeared for it in casual clothes and without thorough preparation decided to do the interview anyway, but on seeing his recording he asked for a second occasion where he, learning from the previous interview, gave an excellent performance. There have been other cases when the students asked to repeat the interview, which request is always fulfilled.

Feedback

At the end of the course the students are asked to give unanimous feedback on the course. Some of the comments are quoted here (verbatim):

Student 1: „This course was one of the most useful, challenging and very practical course..... I think I will be able to use the details and tricks on interviews and in writing CVs in my future too. I also liked that we had this course in a small group so that it was very peaceful and personal, this rarely happens that the teacher and students know each others' names...”

Student 2: “I really liked the course because it was a great help in preparing for job interviews..... However, the mock-interview was a bit frightening with all the others sitting behind me, but it was a great experience. I think this knowledge will last and in real job-interview situations I could do my best.”

Student 3: “... I especially liked the work with the camera because I think if we can overcome our nervousness with the camera on we will be able to do well in the real life. We could also replay the recordings and saw ourselves in a way we had never done before.“

Conclusion

Most of the experts on the topic of job-seeking suggest that mock job interviews help the prospective candidates to gain confidence, learn from their experience and the feedback provided by peers and / or experts. This opinion seems to have been supported by the experience of the students who have taken part in the course called *Career moves*, where they are required to take part in a mock interview after a long period spent with preparation for the task. It is clear from their opinions that they find this kind of exercise useful and even those who thought that they would not be able to give a good performance in an interview situation and that recording the interview has little benefit for them are usually satisfied with the outcome. The aim of this course is to provide the students with personalized CVs and motivation letters, which can be developed at later stages of their career, to familiarize them with the interview situation thus reduce the fear of the unknown and to convince the students that it is possible and necessary to prepare for a job interview. The personalized approach is essential in this kind of work. Many students, who were invited to real job interviews during the course, have been employed or granted internships, after which they claimed the course had helped them significantly.