

ENHANCING EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS IN ESP (ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES) CONTEXT – A STUDY CONDUCTED AT SOUTH EAST EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY

Elena Spirovska Tevdovska

Language Center, Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communication, South East European University,
Tetovo, Republic of Macedonia
E-Mail: e.spirovska@seeu.edu.mk

Abstract. *The purpose of this paper is to define the notion of employability skills and to position the term in the context of higher education and language teaching and learning, more specifically the context of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) environment. The importance of employability skills in the context of higher education is frequently emphasized due to the expectations that higher education needs to produce future experts with marketable skills and competencies which will be valued by the employers. However, the process of including employability skills in higher education is not always straightforward and often entails complex decisions regarding the skills to be included and the mode of inclusion. The selection of skills to be included and the models and ways (Bridgstock, 2009; Knight & Yorke, 2003) of including employability skills are presented. The paper also presents the views and the perspectives of students in ESP classes regarding the necessity of employability skills, compared to the views of potential employers. In addition, the paper suggests modes of including employability skills in the context of language teaching and learning.*

Key words: *employability skills, language teaching, language learning, English for Specific Purposes.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to provide insight into and definition of the notion of employability skills and to emphasize the importance of the employability skills in higher education. In addition, the article suggests ways of implementing employability skills in teaching English for Specific Purposes and raising students' and teachers' awareness of the importance of these skills.

Throughout the period of 15 years, the conditions in higher education in the Republic of Macedonia have changed significantly. The number of universities and academic programs has grown significantly. Unlike the previous decades, when only two state universities existed and offered the available academic programs, a significant number of state and private universities have been opened. In addition, their academic offer has significantly expanded and the number of students accepted has increased at both state and private universities. As a result, an increased percentage of high school graduates enter university programs and complete university education, subsequently entering the job market as university graduates.

It is clear that the above mentioned situation has changed the expectations of the job market. The demands of the university graduates in terms of skills and preparation when entering a workplace are growing. Knight & Yorke (2003, p.1), describing the situation in higher education (HE) in United Kingdom state the following: “Over the past 50 years expectations of higher education have grown. While it can be argued that subject matter has become more complex, governments, employers and other stakeholders have come to expect higher education to contribute to the variety of complex skills, which - they argue - enhances the stock of human capital and makes for national economic well being .”

The arguments they provide regarding the expectations of the employers illustrate the necessity for equipping the students with skills which are unique, marketable and which contribute to their faster employment and successful careers.

2. EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS - DEFINITION AND GROUPS

There are various definitions of the term employability and the notions of employability skills. Therefore, it is not straightforward and simple to define employability and the aspects of employability, to group and list the competencies which are comprised by the term employability skills. Yorke (2006, p. 8) defines employability as: “a set of achievements - skills, understanding and personal attributes - that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be more successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.”

Yorke (2006) proceeds to add the following details to this definition:

- It is probabilistic. It is not certain that obtaining these skills guarantee employment.
- Skills and knowledge cannot be defined in very narrow terms.
- Gaining a job and succeeding are not identical processes.
- The choice of occupation is likely to be constrained, which emphasises the value of adaptability and flexibility.

Hillage and Pollard (1998) define the term employability skills as a set of three abilities, which include the following: gaining employment, maintaining employment and obtaining new employment.

What can be included in the set of skills which enhance the chances of finding and maintaining employment? The skills can be divided into the following areas.

2.1. Degree subject knowledge, understanding and skills

These skills include the ability to understand and speak the necessary language (languages), technical or academic knowledge related to the relevant area of expertise, reading and writing skills. Pool and Sewell (2007, p.281) define the academic skills as degree subject knowledge, understanding and skills. They state the following regarding the importance of academic skills: “It is essential to recognise that employers will judge graduates on the basis of how successfully they have completed their degree course (i.e. their degree classification) perhaps because this is often the sole measure available to them. However, they proceed to emphasise that even though degree subject knowledge is important, it is not the only prerequisite for securing successful and satisfying future careers. Bridgstock (2009, p.37) describes the discipline-specific skills as skills which address occupational requirements and included in university curricula.

2.2. Graduate attributes

Bowden et al.'s (2000, in Bridgstock, 2009) define the graduate attributes, describing them as qualities and skills that graduates are expected to develop during the time they spent in an academic institution and shape the contribution that graduates can potentially make to the society and their future careers. These skills include the following: awareness of social cohesion, equity and human rights, awareness of ecological sustainability, ability to contribute to functional society.

2.3. Employability skills

Employability skills are skills which are related to obtaining and keeping working positions. Bridgstock (2009) describes the employability skills as a group of skills consisted of two subgroups. One is the group of generic skills as well as discipline specific skills, which are crucial for successful performance in a specific working environment. The second group is a group of career management skills, which are divided into two subgroups: self-management and career building.

2.4. Generic skills

Pool and Sewell (2007) , list the following generic skills: imagination and flexibility, willingness to learn, independent working, ability to work in team, ability to manage others, ability to work under pressure, attention to detail, time management, planning, coordinating and organizing ability, ability to use new technologies. Bridgstock (2009, p.37) defines the generic skills as transferable skills which include information literacy, working with technology, written and verbal communication, ability to work in team.

2.5. Self management skills

Bridgstock (2009, p.37) describes the skills of self-management as "...individual's perception and appraisal of themselves in terms of values, abilities, interest and goals." These skills are related to the concepts of career identity and career success.

Pool and Sewell (2007) emphasise the importance of self-efficacy/self-confidence and self-esteem, which according to them, provide a link between the degree subject knowledge and skills, generic skills and employability. Bandura (1995, in Pool and Sewell, 2007) provides a list the underpinning sources for self-efficacy, which include mastery experiences (which are a result of completing a particular task), vicarious experiences (when observing others who successfully complete a task) and social persuasion (when people are persuaded that they possess the abilities needed for mastering and completing a task). By exposing individuals to mastery experiences, vicarious experiences and social persuasion, self – efficacy can be increased. Self confidence, on the other hand, is evident from individuals' manners, behaviour and self-assurance. It can be seen as a personality trait, but also as a situationally specific concept which can be fostered and increased.

2.6. Career building skills

According to Bridgstock (2009,p.37), career building skills can be defined as follows: "Career building skills are skills relating to finding and using information about careers, labour markets and the world of work and then locating, securing and maintaining work, as

well as exploiting career opportunities to gain advancement or other desired outcomes.” To exemplify, the following skills can be included in the group of career building skills:

- Awareness of the characteristics of a certain industry(opportunities threats, positive and negative features, rules and structures, existing working culture and labour market information.
- Effectiveness in identifying and selecting career opportunities for advancement.
- Knowledge and skills how to apply for and obtain working positions
- Building ‘social capital’ by creating personal and professional relationships with relevant individuals who might create opportunities for future career advancement.

3. INCLUSION AND POSITION OF EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

From the definitions and descriptions of employment skills in the previous chapter, it is obvious that employability skills are important and frequently crucial in the process of locating, applying for and obtaining working positions. In addition, employability skills impact the future career outcomes and success. Yorke (2006, p.3) states the following: “The employability of graduates has an aim that governments around the world have, to varying extents, imposed on national higher education systems.” Yorke (2006) proceeds to explain that the trends of including employability in higher education derive from the human capital theory (Becker, 1975, in Yorke, 2006), which argues that the task of government is to foster conditions which increase the productive potential and improve the skills of the potential employees. Robles (2012) reviews studies (Klaus, 2010 in Robles, 2012) which indicate that companies rate their employees interpersonal and self management skills as more important than their analytical abilities. Robles (2012, p 461) states the following regarding the employability skills and their inclusion in educational curricula: ”Even in quantitative areas, educators must instil the importance and development of soft skills in addition to specific discipline foundation. Surprisingly, most of one’s education is time spent on technical skills, but integration of soft skills with technical skills is critical.”

Therefore, it is important to plan and include the employability skills in higher education curricula, thus providing the students with a form of employability capital-knowledge, awareness and understanding of the necessary skills which will help them to succeed better in their working environment. Of course, the question is how? What are the most effective modes and teaching practises which can be used to include employability skills in higher education curricula?

Robles (2012) suggests the following regarding including employability skills in the curriculum:

- Introducing students to people skills.
- Teaching essential customer service skills.
- Foster student understanding by facilitating a problem solving discussion based on real-life situations.
- Have students demonstrate the people skills they have in mock professional setting and role-play exercises.

Yorke (2006, p.14) illustrates the inclusion of employability in higher education with the following statement: “Given that the account of employability stresses complexity, it follows that a pedagogy for employability (and the associated assessment): (a) needs to

take the inherent complexity of the construct into account, and (b) will be promoting similar achievements to those that teachers in higher education tend to value.” Therefore, when including employability skills in higher education, educators need to be aware of the complexity of the notion employability as well as the influence of the educational environment on the modes of inclusion of the employability skills.

McFarlane (in Hartley, 2005) describes the case of developing employability at Staffordshire University and the institutional strategies for enhancing student employability. According to McFarlane, employability skills are introduced through a range of activities which can be either embedded in the curriculum or organized centrally as workshops and seminars. The Undergraduate Modular Framework at Staffordshire University includes employability in its Design Principles: “All awards should enhance student employability, enabling them to identify and develop their key skills, work related learning and career management skills. A Student Employability group, which consists of academic and service based staff, is operating with the major purpose of providing opportunities for all students to enhance their employability. Apart from integrating employability skills in the curriculum, the key skills are developed through discrete modules, such as Personnel Management Workshop, which offers students a simulation of the entire recruitment process, including analysing advertised positions, short listing and interviewing. Careers Module, which is universal for the entire student population, aims to enable students to define career objectives and plans, to engage with the recruitment processes and to develop the ability to control their future careers. The University also offers opportunities for all students to gain experience in professional environment related to their field of study, such as employer visits, projects set by potential employers or employer based mentoring.

From the modes of implementing employability skills described above, it can be seen that there are several ways to include employability skills in higher education setting, either as separate courses offered across curricula or embedded skills in various university courses.

4. RESEARCH METHODS, TARGET POPULATION, RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

One of the aims of this study is to examine the views and perspectives of students on the importance of employability skills, compared with the views on the necessity of employability skills of potential employers. As a result, the research method was based on a questionnaire which consisted of 17 statements which compared the importance of theoretical knowledge and diplomas, practice and opportunity to practice the learned material in educational setting compared to the importance of employability skills.

The statements included in the questionnaire are relevant to various categories of employment skills and involve, for instance,

- generic skills such as ability to work in a team, problem solving skills (for instance statements 4, 5, 6, 7)
- self –management skills and career building skills (for instance statement 8 , 12, 15, 16, 17)
- degree subject knowledge, understanding and skills (such as statement, 1, 2, 3, 13, 14)
- graduate attributes (for instance statement 11)

The questionnaire was given to two groups of participants. One group was a group of students who study in the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) groups (ESP for Computer Sciences and ESP for Business Administration). Their age varies from 19-22 years old.

Their language proficiency varies from intermediate to upper intermediate. This group consisted of 22 participants.

The other group of participants consisted of potential employees. The number of participants in this group is 11. Nine out of 11 (eleven) participants are employed in two local banks and 2 participants are employed in a company which designs computer software, on different positions which include loan officers (2), managers (2), managers of separate departments and sectors within a company (3) and assistant managers (2) as well as sales managers (2). Their age varies from 29-45.

The same questionnaire was administered to both groups of participants and the results are described below. The results suggest that the students place greater importance on the degree subject knowledge, understanding and skills. According to students' responses, 18 agree or strongly agree that it is very important to have a university degree or other formal academic qualification. This group of participants also place great importance on the theoretical knowledge related to specific areas of study. In addition, students also believe that it is really important to have and to use the opportunity to practice the content matter and theory (16 out of 22 agree and 4 are neutral). Furthermore, students believe that it is really important to be able to deliver a good presentation (14 students agree or strongly agree). The results show that effective written communication in a formal setting is also considered to be important.

However, this group of participants does not see the importance of other skills, such as generic skills, self-management skills and graduate attributes. For instance, the results show that 10 participants from this group believe that it is not very important to be able to communicate effectively with other colleagues. The majority of them are neutral or do not think that it is important to be able to work in a team (6 neutral answers, 8 disagree or strongly disagree). This group of participants is also neutral or does not see the importance of the ability to interact with people from different ethnic and cultural background. In addition, they display the same attitude towards the ability to deal with conflicts, since 6 of them are neutral and 10 disagree or strongly disagree. Finally, this group of participants doubts the usefulness of the ability to work independently and with less supervision (12 disagree and 6 are neutral). The results suggest that the ability to solve unexpected or problematic situations is not considered to be important by this group of participants, since 14 disagree and 6 are neutral.

The results obtained from the second group of participants are in contrast with the group obtained from the first group. This contrast can be perceived in the discrepancy between the numbers and the priority placed on different abilities and skills. For instance, the second group of participants, the potential employers, does not believe that having formal University education or theoretical knowledge is very important. The numbers show that out of 11 participants, 8 disagreed or strongly disagreed that priority should be placed on formal qualifications and certificates of formal education. Theoretical knowledge is also not considered to be important, since only 1 participant agreed that it is important.

On the other hand, the potential employers believe that the ability to adapt and use the skills and knowledge in real life situations is significant, since 11 participants agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. They also believe that communicating effectively with other colleagues and managers is important, since 10 out of 11 agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. The ability to interact with people from different ethnic or cultural background is also valued, since this group of participants agreed with this statement entirely. The same attitude was displayed towards the ability to work independently and with less supervision, as well as the ability to deal with unexpected or problematic situations (11 participants agreed or strongly agreed).

From the results presented and discussed above, it can be concluded that there is a discrepancy between the perceived priorities of current University students and future employees and the perceived priorities of potential employers. While students value, above everything, the qualifications gained in a formal educational system, the employers prioritize the employability skills over formal education. Therefore, it is important to raise students' awareness of the value and importance of these skills. Furthermore, modes of instruction and ways of embedding employability skills in the University education and curricula are also essential.

The results are presented in the table below.

Table 1 Students' perceptions towards the importance of employability skills

Participants' survey students' perspectives					
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. Having a University degree and certificates of formal education is a priority	8	10	2	2	0
2. Having theoretical knowledge related to a specific area of studies (Computer Sciences, Business Administration) is a priority.	8	8	4	1	1
3. Having practice and opportunity to practice what was learned at University is a priority.	10	6	4	1	1
4. Being able to adapt and use the skills I have in real life situations is a priority.	5	4	4	4	5
5. Being able to communicate effectively with colleagues is a priority.	4	4	4	6	4
6. Being able to work successfully in a team is a priority	4	4	6	6	2
7. Being able to communicate effectively with the manager/ authority is a priority.	2	2	8	8	2
8. Being able to deal with criticism effectively is a priority.	2	2	6	6	6
9. Being able to present new ideas is a priority.	2	5	6	8	1
10. Being able to think creatively is a priority.	5	8	2	6	2
11. Being able to interact with people from different ethnic and cultural background is a priority.	4	4	8	5	5
12. Being able to resolve conflicts successfully is a priority.	3	3	6	5	5
13. Being able to deliver a successful presentation is very important.	8	6	2	6	0
14. Being able to write effectively (formal e-mails, letters) is very important.	4	6	4	6	4
15. Being able to work independently and requiring less supervision is a priority.	2	2	6	6	6
16. Being able to deal with unexpected or problematic situations is a priority.	1	1	6	8	6
17. Being able to provide solutions for the problems is a priority.	1	1	8	6	6

Table 2 Potential employers' perceptions towards the importance of employability skills

Potential employers' perspectives	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. Having a university degree and certificates of formal education is a priority	0	1	1	4	4
2. Having a theoretical knowledge related to a specific area of studies (Computer Sciences, Business Administration) is a priority.	0	1	0	6	4
3. Having practice and opportunity to practice what was learned at University is a priority.	4	4	3	0	0
4. Being able to adapt and use the skill in real life situations is a priority.	5	4	2	0	0
5. Being able to communicate effectively with colleagues is a priority.	5	6	0	0	0
6. Being able to work successfully in a team is a priority	5	4	1	1	0
7. Being able to communicate effectively with the manager/ authority is a priority.	4	6	1	0	0
8. Being able to deal with criticism effectively is a priority.	2	2	3	2	1
9. Being able to present innovative ideas is a priority.	4	3	2	1	1
10. Being able to think innovatively is a priority.	4	3	2	1	1
11. Being able to interact with people from different ethnic and cultural background is a priority.	5	5	1	0	0
12. Being able to resolve conflicts successfully is a priority.	2	2	4	2	1
13. Being able to deliver a successful presentation is very important.	3	4	2	1	1
14. Being able to write effectively (formal e-mails, letters) is very important.	3	4	3	1	0
15. Being able to work independently and requiring less supervision is a priority	4	5	2	0	0
16. Being able to deal with unexpected or problematic situations is a priority	5	6	0	0	0
17. Being able to provide solutions for the problems is a priority.	4	4	3	0	0

5. TEACHING PRACTICES AND MODES OF EMBEDDING EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL AND IN ESP CONTEXT

The previous research and the results of the questionnaire summarized in the previous chapter strongly suggest that employability skills should be introduced and taught in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) context and included in university curricula.

One way of bridging the gap between university studies and future employment is to introduce career centers which operate within the university framework. The Career Center which exists at South East European University cooperates with current students as well as SEEU alumni. The Career Center provides relevant information regarding internship opportunities as well as the potential employment opportunities. It also provides workshops and trainings which assist students in their job search, including CV, resume and motivational letter writing.

South East European University also offers courses at both undergraduate and MA studies which include employability skills in their aims and objectives. The following courses, which contribute to the development of employability skills, are listed in both undergraduate and postgraduate study programs as free elective courses, which are offered to the entire student population at SEEU:

- Business and Professional Communication (Master studies program)
- Communication Skills (Undergraduate program)
- Professional Career Development Undergraduate program)

Another way of including employability skills in university study programs are language courses, both general English language courses and ESP (English for Specific Purposes) courses. Although different elements of employability skills instruction are already included in ESP context, it is also of vital importance to raise student awareness of the importance of these skills. There are several possible ways of introducing employability skills in ESP context.

5.1. Problem solving activities and tasks

Including problem solving activities and tasks in the instructional process and ESP courses, which will potentially result in group work, working on tasks providing solutions for problems which can be encountered in real life situations. These activities can include a variety of situations or problems, including resolving conflicts, deciding or providing solutions or answers for ethical or moral dilemmas, as well as discussions and debates on various issues. Providing reasons and arguments for a specific decision or solution are also a part or result of these activities.

5.2. Effective written communication

Providing tasks opportunities for *effective written communication* include formal e – mail or formal letter writing. The area of formal written communication includes also Curriculum Vitae and resumes writing, letters of application, letters of interest; report writing and official requests can be appropriate tasks which will introduce the aspect of career building skills and employability skills.

5.3. Simulations of various situations and role plays

Simulations of various situations relevant for students' future careers and workplaces, starting from job interviews, simulations of meetings, discussions in the workplace, telephone conversations, accepting and rejecting various proposals, dealing with potential clients as well as defining appropriate behavior at work.

5.4. Case studies or reports analysis which involve critical thinking and providing opinion on how to behave or react in certain workplace situations, which can include descriptions and providing solutions. For instance, a case study which presents a case of customer dissatisfaction or a discussion trying to resolve a conflict between two employees can be used as a mode of instruction and embedding employability skills.

It is evident that the above mentioned ways of embedding employability skills in ESP context are not limited to the options suggested in this chapter, although the teaching practices described above can be effectively included in the majority of ESP course programs and lessons. In addition, they are engaging and interesting for the students and can be potentially successful when introducing the concept of employability and employability skills to students in higher education setting.

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