

What do ESP students learn when „interviewing a client“?

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Abstract:

In the presentation I would like to share my experience from introducing a complex activity of “interviewing a client” into the lessons of Legal English. The original aim was to develop the students’ communication skills and to practice vocabulary in an authentic context, nevertheless, monitoring the activity showed a number of noteworthy moments of how the learners approach the task.

The first part of the activity concerned preparation for the interview: brainstorming necessary skills, watching and discussing motivational video, and revising vocabulary and language functions. The middle part consisted of roleplaying lawyer-client interviews and self-reflexion. The activity was completed by a follow-up letter to the client. Even though the students enjoyed the motivation part which was supposed to stress the importance of soft skills, their roleplaying sometimes resembled a good “chat”. It was only when many “lawyers” identified the “client” as the most difficult aspect of the interview that the students realized the significance of effective communication.

Interviewing a client is important in many professions and practicing interviews in LSP classes need not be only a way of revising vocabulary, but it can increase the students’ awareness of their inter-personal skills.

1. Introduction

We can design numerous communication tasks related to the professional environment within LSP courses. This paper describes one of them: dealing with a client in a legal context. The students performed two main specific tasks: interviewing a client and writing a follow-up email, nevertheless, the activity itself aimed at a wider goal: to point out the features of effective communication in a legal profession.

The paper describes the activity divided into parts and comments on the performance of students in the sub-tasks. As the learners approached the activity with various expectations and attitudes, I would like to share my experience resulting from monitoring and evaluating their work.

2. The aim of the activity

Roleplaying a lawyer-client conversation can appear at many places of any course of legal English. I have attempted to handle it as a complex activity covering two main objectives: practicing legal English in an authentic context and developing the students’ communication competencies. As it is rather difficult for the learners to focus on both objectives, it is

advisable to decide what the main goal of the task should be. We can choose, for example, a simple legal issue and to concentrate on communication skills; or we can put emphasis on a legal topic while revising communication strategies.

As for the former objective, the task can be to practice terminology by explaining legal issues to a client, or to compare various legal options.

The latter objective concerns not only improving the students' oral and written skills by emphasizing the correct language, form and style, but also discussing the role of soft skills as opposed to hard skills. Soft skills can be explained as „the character traits and interpersonal skills that characterize a person's relationships with other people. In the workplace, soft skills are considered a complement to hard skills, which refer to a person's knowledge and occupational skills.“ (Soft Skills 2012)

3. The description of the activity

The activity can be divided into three parts: pre-interview tasks, roleplaying interviews and the follow-up correspondence. The hints for preparing individual subtasks with a concrete example of motivation video can be found in (Bilová, Chovancová 2012).

3.1. Pre-interview tasks

Although an overall preparation for the interview can be quite time consuming, it helps the students to realize that a well conducted interviewing is not a simple task, and at the same time it facilitates their performance in the interview. It is not necessary to use all the tasks mentioned below, the teacher can choose only some depending on the goal of the activity and the students' knowledge. Some exercises can be done separately, e.g. in previous lessons.

Before roleplaying the students should be prepared in the following areas: legal English, appropriate language (phrases and their functions), interview stages, soft skills, formal correspondence.

As mentioned above, interviewing can be connected to many topics of legal English. The teacher may successfully include them in e.g. contracts, torts, crimes, company law, family law, civil procedure, criminal procedure.

The language functions can be linked to interview stages, the teacher can set various tasks, for example, ordering the steps of the interview, connecting phrases to the steps, filling in missing words into phrases/steps, or comparing formal and informal phrases. Having a handout with phrases and stages at their disposal is appreciated especially by those students who are not very confident with their English.

As far as the correspondence is concerned, the students can have various knowledge of legal writing. The task may be set with a sample letter for the students who encounter writing letters of advice for the first time.

The teacher can draw the attention of students to soft skills by a number of ways. I have used two methods – discussions and video. The discussion can be either in a class, or in groups first. We can also use the following instructions: each group should write down three skills which they consider important for a successful lawyer-client interview. They write each of them on a big piece of paper so that the pieces can be stuck on the board and discussed.

Video scenes of interviewing a client can be found in a number of American “legal” series which are rather popular with the students and using them increases students’ motivation to perform the task. The procedure with implementing the video can be the following: the students are given the basic facts about a case and a client in the first watching, and then they discuss the interview from the lawyer’s point of view: what questions to ask, what problems to anticipate, etc. If there is a non-standard case/client, the students realize how important a sufficient preparation for the interview is. By watching the interview they can compare their expectations and evaluate how the lawyer coped with the interview. The video can be used for illustrating the role of non-verbal behaviour as well – the students watch the interview without the sound first and guess the result only by seeing the body language.

3.2. Roleplaying interviews

The students receive descriptions of their roles in a pair: a lawyer and a client. There is a number of possibilities how to set the instructions depending on what the teacher needs to focus on. If we want a quick revision of the skills connected with practicing a legal topic, the teacher can opt for the description in just a few sentences and the students themselves are supposed to make up the majority of the interview, or they can obtain a more detailed description including, for example, hints on the stages. The description may or may not include help with legal advice to be given to the client.

The pairs roleplay two interviews (with different cases) so that each of them experiences being in the shoes of the lawyer. The students should evaluate their own performance as lawyers afterwards. It can be just a quick self-reflexion: “What have I succeeded in?”, and “What could be improved next time?”, or the teacher can ask questions directed at fulfilling the aim of the task.

3.3. Follow-up correspondence

The students are asked to summarize the interview in an email to the client and then to review two email of their classmates’. We use the CJV MU Peer Review software (Peer Review 2012) which facilitates the administration of sending the texts to the students. The teacher gives general, sometimes individual, feedback afterwards.

4. How the students performed

As the activity involved several subtasks related to different skills, the students’ performance varied depending on their abilities and preferences. This part of paper describes some surprising or difficult moments during performing the tasks.

4.1. Pre-interview tasks

The exercises dealing with legal English, language functions, correspondence and interview stages belong to regular tasks used in the lesson, therefore the students do not “suspect” anything extraordinary. A surprise comes when the teacher points out the soft skills aspect, which can appear when dealing with the interview stages and suitable phrases, for example, the students would not expect an ordinary “Hmm, I see.” in the list of useful phrases, which

can lead to discussing an important skill of active listening. That is the reason why I usually set the task of interview stages after the communication skills exercises.

The tasks aimed directly at the soft skills, i.e., brainstorming skills needed for a successful interviewing and the video tasks, are approached either seriously, or amusingly by the students.

If asked to provide three skills or qualities which they consider important for conducting a successful client interview, at least a half of the groups mention professional knowledge and communication skills. The students repeatedly include also being self-confident, polite and patient, however there are plenty of other suggestions, varying from being reliable and honest to being cunning and having a charming personality. Sticking the skills on the board can be of benefit - the skills are divided into soft skills and hard skills, and the class may discuss them. If the students are asked to describe features of effective communication when interviewing a client, they usually agree on:

- active listening
- appropriate questioning
- clear explaining
- logical thinking
- empathy
- giving feedback
- appropriate body language

As far as video tasks are concerned, the majority of the class enjoys them. Nevertheless it can happen that the students are too absorbed in the scene that they miss the true aim of the task. It is therefore the teacher's role to emphasize elements which are important for the roleplays the students have ahead of them.

4.2. Interviewing

The performance of students in the roleplays depends on the instructions and the nature of the students in the pair. We can observe the whole range of attitude towards the task starting with

the students who carefully pay attention to both legal aspects and soft skills, and ending with those who finish after 1 minute. I can mention other typical cases:

- students are too inventive – they have problems to finish the interview because they discuss every little detail
- students are not inventive enough – they just read what is in the instructions and are happy with that
- students are having a good chat without taking care about the instructions
- students are too involved in the legal issues that they forget about the soft skills
- students suppose the lawyer has to solve the client's problem during the interview, although sometimes a sufficient conclusion can be arranging another appointment after finding out necessary information

The students usually do not enjoy the self-reflexion after the interviews. When they are asked about their performance, a lot of them say that it was ok and that they did not have any troubles. Fortunately in every class there are some students who appreciate the emphasis on communication skills and they realize that the task was not so simple. They often admit that it was difficult to explain certain matters, or to answer some questions. Usually, there is somebody from the class who makes the point that it was the client who was difficult. Then the students realize that lawyers should be prepared for unexpected questions and opinions. Experiencing interviews can help students to realize that using efficient communication skills is not the same as having a good chat, and that anybody can work on improving their communication competencies.

4.3. Follow-up email

The teacher learns a lot from the students' correspondence. On the one hand we can see how the students apply their knowledge of writing formal letters, and on the other one, we get an overview of how they managed the interview.

The peer reviewing helps the students in many aspects as well: they practice critical reading and text analysis. Many students do have problems with evaluating somebody else's text, however, if the teacher sets clear instructions what they should comment on: the structure, the content, the style, the language, and the overall impression, everybody is able to point out a

few positive comments, and find which aspects could be improved. Though peer reviewing can seem a little “painful” for some students at the beginning, I am sure it eventually results in improving both reading and writing skills.

The most common mistakes which appear in the students’ emails are related to using appropriate vocabulary and phrases. A relatively high number of students have problems with structuring the email. The grammatical errors include mainly the word order and the use of articles.

5. Conclusion

The students in LSP classes appreciate real-life scenarios and the presented complex task of interviewing a client aims not only at practicing the language in a context, but also at developing professional competencies connected to oral and written skills. The feedback shows that most of the students are aware of the fact that future attorneys-at-law should be equipped not only with legal knowledge, but also with efficient communication abilities.

References:

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