

**USING THE CRITICAL THINKING APPROACH IN TEACHING  
BUSINESS ENGLISH: PROBLEM - SOLVING**

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***Abstract***

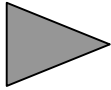
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*The present article focuses on the use of critical thinking skills and techniques during a Business English class on the topic of problem-solving. I included four activities to which students were asked to apply critical thinking skills such as: analysis, interpretation, inference, explanation and evaluation.*

*Students' positive feedback to the practice of critical thinking principles, as well as their active participation in that lesson, add to the other advantages of such a practical approach: a better understanding of the problem solving concept and an increased ability to solve business problems.*

***Keywords:*** Business English, critical thinking, problem solving



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## *Introduction*

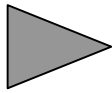
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I teach Business English to 1<sup>st</sup> year students in the Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest. The responsibility of my job is not only to teach them how to produce accurate and natural English, but also to use their English knowledge successfully in several business environments and situations. Among the topics I teach, that of problem-solving is one of great importance for their future careers. The main materials that I use in order to teach it are from *In Company* teacher's book, intermediate level (Gomm, 2006: 67-69).

One of my usual lessons on this topic goes as follows: students look at ways of solving problems; they read about a company which encourages employees to make suggestions and rewards the ones whose suggestions are adopted; then students practise making their own suggestions to solve specific problems; they also listen to a problem-solving meeting and learn some problem-solving techniques and a procedure for holding a problem-solving meeting; they practise giving each other advice on real-life problems; they work in groups to role-play a problem-solving meeting, using the techniques and procedures they have learnt and which are based on actual case studies of problems that major companies have faced. As far as grammar is concerned in this lesson attention is paid to the conditional with past reference and the lexical focus is on collocations relating to people and products. This class on solving problems focuses especially on actually using English in solving problems and on the language of making suggestions while tackling new and delicate issues, but such a topic can be explored a lot more. The main benefit of making use of critical thinking skills and techniques is the fact that students better understand the concept in discussion, which can lead to and actually increases their ability to solve various business problems. And here comes the usefulness of critical thinking skills and techniques; it is a rich source of possibilities to explore a certain text with all its surface and hidden meanings.

What helped me a lot in achieving my goal in extracting most of what a piece of text or a concept can offer a reader were the students themselves who found the topic of problem-solving challenging, as I explained to them that that particular lesson would be different and that we would approach the topic of solving problems by thinking critically. What I discovered during brainstorming, for instance, was that they came up with plausible solutions to certain business problems and contributed valuable ideas to solving them.



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***Applying critical thinking skills and techniques  
in teaching business problem-solving***

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In order to make my lessons more attractive and interactive I use materials from several textbooks. For this seminar in which I decided to test and improve my students' abilities to approach the topic of problem-solving I used some materials besides those offered by *In Company* teacher's book, and designed some tasks intended to practise critical thinking techniques while externalizing and improving students' problem-solving abilities. The core critical thinking skills that I focused on were the following: *analysis, interpretation, inference, explanation* and *evaluation* (Facione, 2007: 6). This approach proved to be challenging to the students who actively participated in this class.

#### ACTIVITY 1

Students were asked to read and *interpret* several texts by giving examples of various business conversations (making contacts, small talk, presenting) among which there were two examples of problem-solving meetings. Their task was to identify which texts exemplified problem-solving meetings. At this stage they made use of their background knowledge about solving problems and *interpreted* the texts by comprehending their meaning and constructing a tentative categorization See Annex 1 for the actual texts.

Finding out which texts refer to problem-solving meetings was not too difficult for the students. And as I usually ask them *to explain* choices this was what they had to do next. They were also asked to work in groups of three and provide their own definitions of 'solving problems' that they were supposed *to infer* from the texts they had already been given. Finally, the definition that all the students in the group agreed upon was the following: *solving problems = finding solutions to problems*.

Then I offered them the definition given in the dictionary<sup>1</sup> (solving problems = finding out / working out the answer or solution to a problem) as well as a quotation belonging to Alan Barker (2004: 67): "*Problem solving is finding ways of getting from where we are to where we want to be*". In order to test and improve students' *analytical skills* I asked them to compare the definition they all agreed upon with the one I gave them together with Alan Barker's definition of problem solving and establish how similar and/or different they were.

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<sup>1</sup> Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary, 1996, New York.

## ACTIVITY 2

Students were asked to read three problems some companies faced and try to solve them with a partner. For this purpose they made use of their *inference skills* as they were faced with some business problems and they had to develop a set of options for addressing them, which they liked a lot. And some of them felt victorious when they discovered that they had been pretty close to the real solutions they listened to afterwards. For the exercise, see Annex 2.

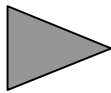
## ACTIVITY 3

Further on as students became more familiar with problem-solving they were asked to work in pairs and do a task meant to activate their *inference skill* again as they were, so to say, faced with several problems, they have a set of objectives but they also had to take certain actions. For this activity, see Annex 3.

## ACTIVITY 4

The following activity, which can be read in Annex 4, focused on problem-solving techniques. For it students made use of their *evaluative skills* after which they had to *explain* how useful they thought the checklist was. The students found this exercise challenging and useful. They admitted that they had a general idea about it, but that exercise made them think systematically and establish logical relationships among statements.

Finally, students were asked to discuss and critically analyze a text containing solutions to a problem. Thus, students identify and evaluate meanings behind the statements.



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**Conclusions**

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In order not to end up with my guesses only, I tried to encourage my students to give some feedback on that particular lesson. I was glad to hear them saying that they found the critical thinking approach a challenging and useful one starting with decoding the significance and clarifying the meaning without bias (interpretation), then presenting the results of their reasoning in a coherent way (explanation), or identifying the similarities and differences between two approaches to the solution of a given problem (analysis), going on and pretending to face with a problem and developing a set of options for addressing it (inference) and, finally, ending with assessing the logical strength of the inferential relationships among statements (evaluation).

The students' positive feedback concerning the use of critical skills and techniques during that Business English class encouraged me to use the critical thinking approach as much as possible as (among its already mentioned benefits in this paper) it brings a plus of interest and originality to the lesson.

### *Annex 1*

Read the texts below and establish which of them refer to solving problems and comment on the problems which need to be solved. What other business interactions do the other texts exemplify?

#### *Text 1*

*A: What I want to know is: how do we maintain our profit margins with labour costs rising the way they are?*

*B: Well, it seems obvious, but how about raising prices? I mean even with a 2% price rise, we'd still be very competitive.*

*C: I'm afraid that's not an option. This is an extremely price-sensitive market.*

*B: I know that, but what else do you suggest? If we don't cover our costs, we'll soon be running at a loss.*

*A: Now, let's not panic. The answer could be to shift production to somewhere like South-East Asia. We've talked about it before.*

*C: And close down our plants here? Wouldn't it be easier if we just tried to renegotiate with the unions – get them to accept a lower pay offer?*

*A: If we'd been able to get the union to accept a lower pay offer, John we wouldn't be considering outsourcing to Asia.*

#### *Text 2*

*A: Er, how do you do. I'm Tom Pearson., Export Manager, Falcon Petroleum.*

*B: How do you do, Mr. Pearson. I am Sakamoto, Assistant Director of International Investments, Mizoguchi Bank. Please sit here opposite the door. You'll be next to Usami-san.*

*A: Oh, OK, I sit here, right?*

*B: That's right. Have you tried green tea before, Mr. Pearson?*

*A: Er, yes, I have. I had it last time I was here. I like it very much.*

#### *Text 3*

*A: OK, this brings us on the next item on our agenda this morning, which is online business. Now, I know some of you are concerned about the recent performance of E-Stock, our online subsidiary. So I've asked Gary Cale, our new head of e-business, to bring us up to date. Over to you, Gary.*

*B: Thanks, Michelle. To start off, then. I know you have all seen the figures up to the last quarter – disappointing to say the least. Nine months ago, when we first went online, we were getting over 250,000 hits a day. Three months ago, when I joined this company, we were getting just 60,000 and it was obvious we were*

*failing to attract sufficient customers to our website. So, what was going wrong? In a word, technology. The problem was not the service we were offering, but the website itself.*

*Text 4*

*A: Ok, we both know the problem. Basically, we can't get retail stores to stock our new product. They say it's too expensive. So the question is: how do we get access to the customer?*

*B: What if we offered it on a sale or return basis?*

*A: No, I don't think so. If we did that, we'd just create cash flow problems for ourselves.*

*B: Hm. Well, another option would be to sell it directly online.*

*A: It's a possibility, but I really don't think we know enough about e-commerce to take the chance. And if we start bringing in Internet specialists, we could end up spending a fortune.*

*B: Of course, we wouldn't have this problem if we'd priced the product more sensibly in the first place.*

*Text 5*

*A: Is this your first visit to Russia?*

*B: Er, yes, it is, actually. Fascinating place.*

*A: Yes, isn't it? I come here quite a lot. What do you do, by the way? I see you work for Glaxo.*

*B: How did you know? ... Oh, yeah, my badge. Yeah, I'm in R&D molecular modeling to be precise.*

*A: Really? We should talk. Can I get you a drink?*

*B: Er, no thanks. I'm fine.*

*A: Sure?*

*B: Well, just a top-up then. Thanks.*

*A: What are you drinking? The Chardonnay, isn't it?*

*B: Erm, yeah. So, what line of business are you in?*

**Annex 2**

Read the following problems that three real companies faced. Try to solve them with a partner. Compare your ideas with the rest of the group:

*1. The owner of a Mexican restaurant in San Francisco faced a dilemma. She wanted to advertise but couldn't afford to pay for space in the local newspaper or for airtime on the local radio station.*

*2. The manager of a bank in the UK had become alarmed at the number of stolen cheques being cashed. Signatures were simply too easy to forge. Something had to be done.*

3. A company that makes industrial cleaners and sells them by direct mail had an obvious problem – boring product, boring market. The question was: how could they get noticed?

### **Annex 3**

Problem-solving meetings should start with clear objectives and end with clear actions. Look at the problems and objectives in the box. Complete the suggestions in column 3 using the phrases below.

- a** to shift production to somewhere like South-East Asia
- b** to sell it direct online
- c** delay the new product launch
- d** offered it on a sale or return basis
- e** encrypting our most confidential information
- f** sell it at a discount
- g** raising prices
- h** we involved the police
- i** bought the company out
- j** just manufacture our own components

#### **What's the problem?**

1. We can't get retail outlets to stock our new product
2. Our sole supplier is about to go bankrupt!
3. rising labour costs are reducing profits
4. old unsold stock is starting to pile up in the warehouses
5. someone in the company is passing on information to the competition!

#### **What's our objective?**

1. To get access to the customer
2. To get the supplies we need
3. To maintain our profit margins
4. To create space for the new product
5. To protect our competitive advantage

#### **What action can we take?**

1. What if we \_\_\_\_\_ ?  
Another option would be \_\_\_\_\_ .
2. Supposing we \_\_\_\_\_ ?  
Alternatively, we could \_\_\_\_\_ .

3. How about \_\_\_\_\_?  
The answer could be \_\_\_\_\_.
4. Why don't we \_\_\_\_\_?  
Couldn't we just \_\_\_\_\_?
5. What about \_\_\_\_\_?  
Maybe it's time \_\_\_\_\_.

#### Annex 4

Do you have a special procedure for dealing with more complex problems?  
Complete the checklist below using the verbs in the boxes:

1-4	review	define	select	brainstorm				
5-12	invite	assign	break	explore	draw up	restate	eliminate	criticize

- Step one: \_\_\_\_\_ the basic problem (1) \_\_\_\_\_ the problem down into parts (5)  
\_\_\_\_\_ the problem as a challenge (6)
- Step two: \_\_\_\_\_ ideas (2) \_\_\_\_\_ everyone to speak (7)  
\_\_\_\_\_ nothing at this stage (8)
- Step three: \_\_\_\_\_ your ideas so far (3) \_\_\_\_\_ the possibilities of each idea (9)  
\_\_\_\_\_ impractical suggestions (10)
- Step four: \_\_\_\_\_ the best solution (4) \_\_\_\_\_ an action plan (11)  
\_\_\_\_\_ different tasks to different people (12)

Read the following dialogue a problem-solving meeting. Try to map out the main elements of the argument (reasons given in support of a claim) it contains.

*A: Ok, we both know the problem. Basically, we can't get retail stores to stock our new product. They say it's too expensive. So the question is: how do we get access to the customer?*

*B: What if we offered it on a sale or return basis?*

*A: No, I don't think so. If we did that, we'd just create cash flow problems for ourselves.*

**Conclusion:** We should offer our new product on sale or return basis.



**Reason** (General belief – ‘They say’): It’s too expensive having retail stores stock our new product

**Objection:** Offering our product on sale or return basis would create cashflow problems for ourselves.

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