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Developing Critical Thinking and Communicative Fluency in the Business-English Classroom with the SWOT Analysis

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Abstract

This paper proposes a clear working framework for the concept of critical thinking and discusses the rationale for its pedagogical implementation when applied to the SWOT activity in the business-English classroom. This paper specifically details a classroom procedure for introducing the SWOT activity in a practical business-English class where the focus is on fostering critical thinking, communicative fluency (herein conceptualized as meaningful, contextual, skills-based interaction), and the understanding of a basic knowledge of business practices. The paper concludes by highlighting the need to incorporate these elements in order to better equip learners for the increasingly globalized contexts of business in the future.

キーワード : Business English, communicative fluency, critical thinking, SWOT analysis

Introduction

We have a natural tendency to allow our irrational sides to take control ... Critical thinkers can understand how ideas are connected and evaluate whether information and arguments are relevant and important to addressing the issues at hand. They can build arguments to defend their own beliefs as well as recognize and examine the arguments of others. They can spot gaps in information and errors in the reasoning that lead to conclusions, approaching things calmly and objectively knowing that they are prepared to take things one step at a time until they find the knowledge they seek ... (Rutherford, 2018:20)

Critical Thinking

The word “critical” has negative connotations, such as “judgmental” or “disapproving,” but here critical thinking refers to a self-reflective and analytical way of thinking, one without prejudice. (Takagaki et al, 2016:iii)

According to Brown (2015), and Kallet (2014), we all use critical thinking unconsciously in our lives, and we use it in our decision-making processes underpinning our opinions, values and how we should act. Kallet particularly contends (ibid: 1) that “critical thinking is finding and evaluating evidence to make the best decisions.” More importantly, he concludes that critical thinking is a means to exploiting the knowledge we already have – knowledge based on beliefs, decisions, claims, opinions, arguments, facts, inferences, evidence, and conclusions – in order to make decisions. Critical thinking, he asserts, should not to be confused with knowledge itself.

It is therefore pertinent at this juncture to ask how we can find and evaluate this evidence that we need (exploit our knowledge) in order to make our decisions. Williams (1983: 40) attempts to answer this question with some probing food for thought:

Most of us know a good deal more about what we think than *how* we think, perhaps because so much of our education concerned itself with *what* rather than *how*. We tend to assume that everyone thinks in the same way and that some people are simply better at it than others. In reality, we do not all think the same way at all. We each have our own thinking style...

In her model of thinking (applied to right brain/left brain education), Williams stresses the importance of the following modes of thinking which are involved in higher cognitive processes.” These models are represented in figure 1 below.

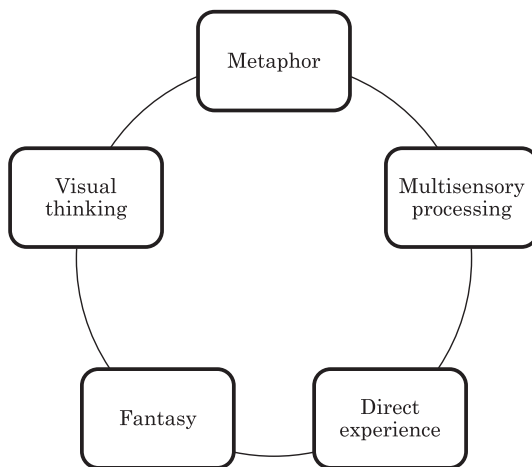


Figure 1. Modes of thinking (adapted from Williams, 1983).

These generic modes of thinking translate into critical thinking, or cognitive engagement, which according to Love and Stobaugh (2018:8) reflects a “commitment to completing and embracing challenges with the task at hand.” Similarly, according to Rutherford (2018), critical thinking can be identified as the following set of characteristics that are present in “strong critical thinkers,” (Rutherford, 2018:21-22):

- curiosity toward a variety of issues;
- desire to be well-informed and a lifelong learner;
- awareness of situations when critical thinking may be beneficial;
- confidence in their own reasoning skills;
- receptive to learning from people with viewpoints that differ from their own;
- openness to a variety of beliefs and opinions;
- objective and fair when analyzing arguments and reasoning;
- recognition of their own biases and prejudices that may cloud their judgment;
- reservation of judgment until they have examined all of the facts;
- willingness to reevaluate their beliefs and adjust or abandon them if they are presented with evidence that justifies it.

In simpler terms, Kallet (2014: 3-4) defines critical thinking as “not our everyday, automatic, not-really-thinking-about-it thinking,” and encapsulates its essence in the following concepts:

- Manual thinking (not automatic)
- Purposeful
- Being aware of the partiality of your thinking, a process
- Thinking that uses a tool set

He also highlights the main benefits of critical thinking (ibid: 7) as:

- clear understanding of problems and situations;
- faster and accurate conclusions and quality decisions;
- a richer variety of explanations and solutions;
- opportunity recognition;
- mistake avoidance;
- thought-out strategies and early elimination of dead ends.

To conclude this section, while critical thinking may be commonly understood as problem solving, or thinking that is “outside the box,” the key ingredients to any such thinking are, in synthesis, reasoning and making wise decisions (Moore and Parker, 2017; Love and Stobaugh, 2018). These ingredients underpin the use of critical thinking with regard to teaching SWOT in the business-English classroom in this paper.

SWOT and the Business-English Classroom

SWOT is an activity that can be found in a wide range of business studies and business-English textbooks as an effective means of teaching practical business skills (Sarsby, 2016;

McElroy, 2015; Fine, 2009), but I have adapted it to make it less daunting and more engaging for elementary/pre-intermediate-level students in my practical business-English classes here in Japan (the class incorporates questions, problems, a case study and role play). In essence, I have implemented a brain-friendly approach which attempts to stimulate the limbic system in the brain. This system functions as a semiotic signaling system enabling a person to consciously and intentionally communicate a message, and it is also responsible for the regulation of self-esteem and confidence (Nergis, 2011).

I tend to introduce SWOT after teaching a similar-style class on FAB, analyzing products according to their feature(s), advantage(s), and benefit(s). I find that SWOT can follow on smoothly from FAB in terms of the critical thinking and analytical skills required on the part of the students. In practical terms, Love and Stobaugh (2018:67) state that critical thinking can be harnessed and fostered through “lessons around questions, problems, and case studies to encourage active, experiential learning where students’ natural curiosities are awakened.” This approach can be applied to teaching SWOT to engender a more dynamic, democratic, interactive, and thought-provoking arena in the classroom.

SWOT is a common business tool or analysis framework used as a strategy by a company for the purposes of marketing, production and sales. SWOT stands for:

- Strengths
- Weaknesses
- Opportunities
- Threats

Essentially, A SWOT analysis is designed to help a company to achieve its objectives, to identify and consolidate those aspects it does well, and to identify and address the obstacles it must overcome or minimize in order to reach its objectives and future goals (Pettinger, 2014).

Classroom Procedure

The approach I have taken in executing the classroom procedure reflects the aim of fostering students’ communicative fluency in the classroom through meaningful, contextual, skills-based interaction as mentioned earlier.

In the first step, I outline the purpose of using SWOT to the students by way of context and then explain how we are going to use it as a way of assessing the current and future situation of a particular company. Following this, I give students a worksheet (worksheet 1) and ask them to stand up, walk around the class and form groups of four or five. After doing this, I ask them to answer the question by brainstorming ideas and discussing them in their groups. The objective here is to ascertain whether students have any prior knowledge of the SWOT analysis and to give them the opportunity to explore their thought processes together, and to arrive at satisfactory conclusions based on their own reasoning and through the equitable sharing of ideas.

What is the meaning of SWOT?

S =

W =

O =

T =

Worksheet 1

As I walk around the classroom, I notice that students are apt to getting very animated and creative in trying to define SWOT, often surprising me with their ability to come up with original concepts in their groups. Some of these are represented in figure 2.

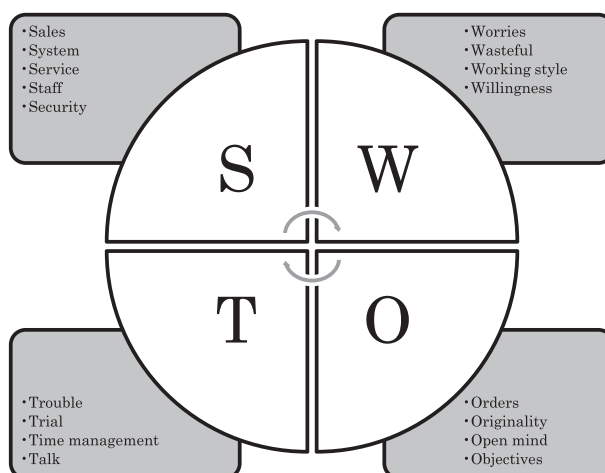


Figure 2. Students' definitions of SWOT in groups.

After a period of time (about 10-15 minutes), I elicit ideas from the students and write them on the board. I also let them elaborate on their ideas at this point in an open forum.

In the next step, I explain the meaning of SWOT incorporating ideas the students themselves have put forward. This allows students to appreciate the full picture and how their contributions can be incorporated into the analysis. Following on from this, I distribute the second handout containing a task for each group (represented in figure 4). This task is in the form of a business case-study for the group to read, discuss, and then apply. Finally, students present on their SWOT analyses to the class (either individually or in groups). I have found

that poster presentations and PowerPoint presentations have worked well in the classroom to create a very lively atmosphere based on whole-class participation.

These are the three steps for this phase of the class (represented in figure 3):

- Reading of a business case study and SWOT analysis with post-reading discussion (represented in figures 4 and 5).
- Task 1: Researching a company (represented in worksheet 2).
- Task 2: Roleplaying a businesswoman (represented in worksheet 3).

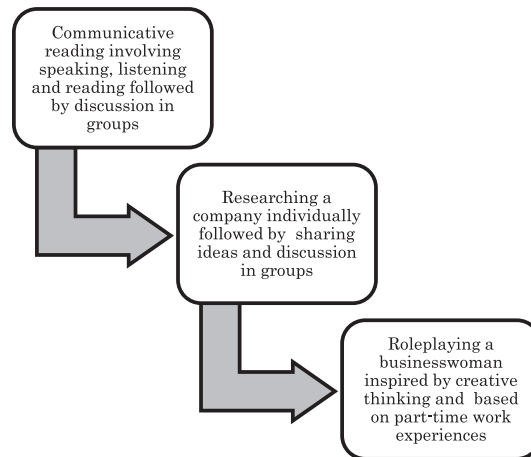


Figure 3. A detailed representation of the three steps.

A Business Case Study

Makiko's Ice Paradise

Makiko's Ice Paradise is a privately-owned ice cream shop in Hiroshima, Japan selling Italian-style ice cream (gelato) made with locally-sourced ingredients. The company is profitable, but Makiko is wondering if she should open a new store to expand her business. She has other ideas too. She is excited and ready for a new challenge but she is also very nervous and worried about the future.

Questions:

1. What are your thoughts on this case study?
2. Do you think selling ice cream is a good idea for a business? Why/not?
3. What do you think Makiko is nervous and worried about?
4. What other ideas do you think she has?
5. What would you do if you were Makiko?

Figure 4. A business case study: Makiko's Ice Paradise.

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Good quality product with unique flavours (especially <i>hassaku</i> citrus fruit, and <i>natto</i>) ● Loyal (local) customer base ● Word of mouth advertising ● Good sales and profit margins 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Single location only ● Only two members of staff ● Not enough advertising ● Limited capital for expansion
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Open another shop to increase business ● Sell to local supermarkets ● Buy new equipment to save time and produce more ● Start a local gelato-making class to develop a lasting relationship with existing customers and to attract new customers ● Create a group of local companies to help promote each other's products 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Famous ice cream brands are also selling unique ice cream flavours ● Consumers are becoming more and more health-conscious ● Local ingredients may become more expensive ● Famous ice cream brands in Japan have more capital to spend on advertising (especially TV commercials) and marketing

Figure 5. A SWOT analysis for Makiko's Ice Paradise

In groups, students take it in turns to read the SWOT analysis (communicative reading involving equal time for each student spent to reading, listening and speaking) making sure they fully understand each component. They then proceed to discuss each frame and offer their opinions on Makiko's business profile and dilemma. I then elicit their opinions and write the key ideas generated by the students on the board. They can then employ these ideas in the following activities. In the next step, I give students a worksheet (worksheet 2) with the next task which is to research a (famous) company locally, nationally or internationally and complete a SWOT analysis for it. I usually allow students 10-20 minutes to do this individually, either using their laptop computers or their Smartphones as a research tool. Students then present their SWOT analyses in groups. Group members are encouraged to ask questions and/or make comments after each presentation. Alternatively, students can (space permitting) attach their worksheet to the walls, or lay them on their desks, and then walk around reading other students' work and writing questions or comments directly onto them or on sticky labels which they attach to the worksheets. Sticky labels work very well as students may decide to

retract a question or comment after writing it, or may decide to write several things at the same time. After collecting their worksheets and returning to their seats, students should be given time to read through the questions and comments and reflect on the most suitable responses that they could give. Time permitting, students can share their questions, comments and responses in groups and give their input to each other too. In the final, whole-class phase of this activity, I elicit opinions from students regarding what they have read or about the questions/comments received. This can become a very lively discussion on particular companies and ways to tackle the SWOT analysis.

Strengths	Weaknesses
Opportunities	Threats

Worksheet 2: Research a company and carry out a SWOT analysis for it.

Subsequently, in worksheet 3, students are invited to imagine that they are business owners and to carry out a SWOT analysis of their company.

<p>Strengths</p>	<p>Weaknesses</p>
<p>Opportunities</p>	<p>Threats</p>

Worksheet 3: You are the owner of a business. Carry out a SWOT analysis for it.

This part can be a little challenging for students, but having already completed a number of tasks related to SWOT, they are better equipped to tackle it and to be as imaginative and creative as possible in the process. Also, given that the majority of students have a part-time job (or several), this gives them valuable working experiences from which to draw ideas. After completing the worksheet, students get into groups and share their SWOT analyses, asking questions wherever possible and offering advice if needed. Alternatively, students can give a presentation session on their SWOT analysis in the form of a poster or PowerPoint slides. The use of role play in this activity is a creative exercise “mirroring a slice of reality” that develops learners’ communicative fluency (Klippel, 1992: 121-122).

Conclusion

This paper has examined how critical thinking can be developed alongside communicative fluency when applied to the SWOT analysis in the business-English classroom. Herein, critical thinking is defined as a conscious process of reasoning and making wise decisions, and communicative fluency is defined as meaningful, contextual, skills-based interaction. The paper also reported on the pedagogical approach, classroom procedure, and materials involved in attempting to develop critical thinking and communicative fluency in tandem. Activities designed to engage students' cognitive and communication skills include self-reflection tasks, group discussions, creative thinking, and active role play. In conclusion, to better prepare students for the challenges ahead of them in the future, this paper has emphasized that both critical thinking and communicative fluency are salient components of the business-English classroom.

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