

## **Critical Thinking in Business English**

**John Hughes**

Business English teachers are familiar with teaching the language for communication skills, such as giving a presentation or negotiating a deal. Perhaps fewer of us consider including the skill of critical thinking as part of our typical Business English course. And yet critical thinking is regarded as one of the key twenty-first century skills that employees look for in a candidate when recruiting. This demand for job applicants with critical thinking skills is also reflected in the course descriptions of many MBA and university-based business programmes which list the development of critical thinking as a core objective.

So can we, as business English teachers, integrate this skill into our courses? The answer is 'yes' and in fact you probably already provide students with language-practice tasks that require critical thinking. Here are five critical thinking skills that I believe the typical Business English lesson can help develop:

### **Critical questioning**

Critical thinkers naturally question information that is presented to them and this clearly has an important role in business. Take, for example, the situation where you have quotes from three different suppliers and you need to select the best offer. It's important to ask questions about each offer rather than accept each of them at face value. In the classroom, we can also develop this skill by asking students questions about a text they have read or listened to which will encourage them to consider it critically. For example, these might include questions like: Do you think the author supports his opinion with facts? Are you convinced by the author's argument? Why? Why not?

### **Challenging assumptions**

Business decisions which are based on assumptions run the risk of being out-of-date or repeating past mistakes. By challenging your assumptions, you are likely to come up with innovative ideas and original products. Class discussions and debates on topical business issues are one way to develop this skill and require students to use the language for expressing opinions, agreeing, and disagreeing.

### **Identifying evidence**

Evidence in business helps us to make informed decisions; for example, a market research survey will help the future development of new products or services which are customer-focused. Ignoring such evidence could result in failure. However, identifying evidence also means separating what is useful or correct evidence from information which may be opinionated or even untrue. This is often the case if you give students a reading text which contains factual information alongside the view of the author. Ask students to underline factual information and circle the writer's opinions in the text.

### **Identifying perspective**

This skill means seeing things from another point of view. It's especially useful in a business situation where, for example, you are negotiating with someone else and need to understand their objectives. Similarly, if you attend a meeting where you disagree with another person, it's helpful to recognise their perspective. In class, using role plays where students take on a different character and have to view a business problem from their point of view is a useful way to develop this skill.

## Creating solutions

My fifth and final critical thinking skill in business is often referred to as problem-solving but I prefer to call it 'creating solutions'. In other words, I give my students a problem and ask them to work in a team and generate a variety of solutions before selecting the best one. Typically, this kind of task might take the form of a case study in which students read about a real business problem and have to create the solution that they would follow.

As you can see, incorporating these kinds of critical thinking skills into your lessons is fairly straightforward as the kind of language practice and classroom activities needed are familiar. The difference is that by defining the sub-skills of critical thinking, you can also clearly state your aims in terms of critical thinking and the language that will be required. Such an approach could be the response we need in order to satisfy the growing demand for business professionals who can combine a command of English with the ability to think critically.

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## References and further reading

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For practical examples of Critical Thinking exercises used in Business English, look at *ETpedia Business English* (Pavilion) and *Business Result Second Edition* (OUP).

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