

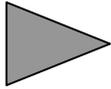
INTEGRATING CRITICAL THINKING IN THE TEACHING
OF PRESENTATIONS¹

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Abstract

One of the skills that non-native English students need to possess is the ability to plan and deliver presentations in this language. As they assume that tertiary students must have already acquired the main concepts needed to produce logically-structured discourse, university teachers of English often focus exclusively on language issues, considering this is enough for helping students develop their ability to present information. However, the author of this article considers the above-mentioned approach is not fully effective, as students need to focus not only on language concepts, but also on elements related to the development of their critical thinking skills when preparing and delivering speeches.

Keywords: presentation skills; critical thinking; critical thinking skills



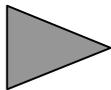
Introduction

Teachers of business English at the Bucharest University of Economics consider their main task is to help students prepare for performing well in their future professional career. Therefore, during the seminars the focus is on practical

¹ This article is based on Carmen-Cristina Catargiu's MA dissertation *Integrating Critical Thinking in the Teaching of Presentations* presented within the framework of the Interdisciplinary Master Programme "English Language Education and Research Communication for Business and Economics", ASE Bucharest, 2008, having Dr. Cristina Neesham as academic supervisor.

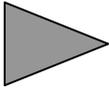
activities and on the development of skills rather than on the prescriptive teaching of grammar rules or vocabulary units. Although skills in all four areas of proficiency – reading, writing, listening and speaking – are considered to be important, many times the focus seems to be on developing oral productive skills.

This article deals with discussing methods of teaching presentations and with suggesting a new approach based on introducing critical thinking aspects into the discussions and activities organized during the seminars of business English. This topic is a relevant one, because developing presentation skills is of the utmost importance for students, as these skills have always represented an important asset not only for the academic activity, but also for the successful professional career of the future graduates. According to a survey report of presentation skills training, carried on in 1989, employers seem to be extremely interested in whether their employees possess such skills or not. During the study, the chief executive officers of the “Fortune 500” industrial companies were sent letters explaining the survey and they were asked to express their opinions on the topic. There were 154 respondents, and most of them highlighted the strong relationship between good presentation skills and job performance. Thus, more than 50% of the participants in the survey considered this ability to be very important for the sales staff, the executives, the middle managers and the human resource staff, important for supervisors and the technical staff, and somewhat important for the secretarial staff. The only case when this skill was perceived as not important was when hourly wage workers were concerned (Corder, 1989: 6). The conclusions are easy to establish: if they are able to convince their potential employers that they are able to deliver successful, well-structured presentations in English, as well as in their native language, graduates already have an advantage over those candidates who do not possess this ability.



Critical thinking concepts and presentation teaching strategies

The purpose of this part of the article is to familiarise the readers with some of the most relevant aspects regarding various perceptions on the concept of critical thinking. References will be made to explanations of the term given by authors of books and articles in the field. Once the general concept is discussed, attention will be paid to the skills required for performing a thorough analysis of an argumentation and to their relevance. In the second section the focus will be on presenting several ideas regarding the way in which authors of English teaching books structure the units on presentations.



1.1 Overview of critical thinking concepts

Although there are still many people who are not theoretically familiar with the term of critical thinking, defining this concept has represented a concern for experts in the field for approximately 100 years. In his book *Critical Thinking. An Introduction* Alec Fisher (2001) presents some of the definitions given to the term in different periods of time, starting with the one provided in 1909 by John Dewey, considered by many to be the father of the modern critical thinking tradition. By analysing several explanations and by selecting relevant aspects from each of them, Fisher is able to provide what he considers to be a comprehensive definition:

... critical thinking is a kind of evaluative thinking – which involves both criticism and creative thinking – and which is particularly concerned with the quality of reasoning or argument which is presented in support of a belief or a course of action.” (Fisher, 2001: 13)

A similar, although more general definition is given by Lau (2003: 1), who defines critical thinking as *“the ability to engage in reflective and independent thinking, and being able to think clearly and rationally”*.

Both definitions start from the idea that critical thinking is an active process, as it involves questioning and meta-cognition (analyzing your own thinking before being able to do so with the others’). Also, they both focus on the idea of skilful reasoning which is meant to help people identify and analyse the reasons and the implications of their own beliefs, as well as of other people’s in order to be able to make the best possible decision. There are also references to the fact that critical thinking is not the only right way of seeing things, and that the important thing is to ask the right questions for a better understanding of the overall situation (Fisher, 2001: 14).

Another opinion that both authors share is related to the unfounded perception according to which critical thinking has only a bad connotation. Thus, Lau (2003: 1) states that critical thinking *“does not mean being argumentative or being critical of others. Although critical thinking skills can be used in exposing fallacies and bad reasoning, they can also be used to support other viewpoints, and to cooperate with others in solving problems and acquiring knowledge.”* In order to persuade people of the positive aspects of critical thinking, experts in the field have even tried to introduce the term of “critico-creative thinking skills” (Fisher, 2001: 13) to highlight the positive side of the process. Fisher explains his and the general public’s preference for the shorter term of “critical thinking”, which should be understood in its *“positive, imaginative sense”* (Fisher, 2001: 13).

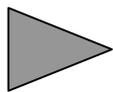
Acquiring and using the skills needed for performing a thorough critical analysis is a complex process which requires several steps: being familiar with the theory, putting it in practice and having the right attitude and motivation throughout the entire process (Lau, 2003: 1). Thus, a critical thinker is someone who is not only skilled, but who also likes challenges and is willing to make efforts and to spend a great amount of time analysing all the relevant aspects before expressing an opinion or making a decision.

There are various lists of skills attached to critical thinking, ranging from more complex to more synthesized ones. Without denying the merits of comprehensive sets of skills, the author of this article chose to focus on a list of only six skills, which Facione (2007) perceives as the most relevant for the process of critical thinking.

In defining what he calls core critical thinking skills, Facione (2007) adopts a reader-friendly approach, as he provides the experts' definitions on each term, accompanied by clear examples meant to help non-specialists understand the concepts better. Since more references to the specific presentation-related functions of these skills will be made later on in this article, this aspect will not be detailed very much at this stage. Instead, there will be a brief presentation of the general uses people can make of these skills according to Facione (2007). **Interpretation** allows people to recognise problems and describe them without bias, read other people's unexpressed intentions, identify main points, categorise and structure information, paraphrase somebody else's ideas or clarifying meanings (Facione, 2007: 5). By using **analysis**, people can identify similarities and differences between different solutions to the same problem, identify unstated assumptions or the relationships of different parts of a discourse to each other or to the main claim, or organise texts by themselves according to the message they want to convey (Facione, 2007: 5). The next skill – **evaluation** – helps its users judge other people's credibility by comparing the strengths and the weaknesses of various interpretations according to the extent in which the evidence provided supports the conclusions (Facione, 2007: 5). The proper use of **inference** makes it possible to see the implications of someone's position, draw out or construct meaning, as well as predict what might happen next or develop options for solving a problem after considering the important aspects involved (Facione, 2007: 6). **Explanation** is useful when it is necessary to describe methods and criteria used to achieve specific results, prove the reasonableness of a certain judgement according to a set of pre-established criteria, present the evidence that made people accept or reject someone else's position or, in the case of teachers or evaluators, make a detailed list of the factors taken into consideration for the assignment of a specific grade (Facione, 2007: 6). Maybe the most important skill, according to the author, is the one of **self-regulation**, which allows people to monitor their own work at various stages, and self-examine and self-correct it. By doing this, people are able to

identify and eliminate the influence of personal bias or self-interest in drawing their conclusions or interpreting other people's messages (Facione, 2007: 7).

Knowing how to apply these skills and being in the right disposition for doing it is extremely important. Once they understand this, people will enjoy immediate benefits, such as obtaining good grades or getting a well-paid job, but also long-term ones, as critical thinking helps them become independent learners and masters of their own self-development. Furthermore, they will become valuable citizens, willing and prepared to make their own reasonable and informed decisions, thus helping in the building and development of a "rational and democratic society", in which critical thinking is a fundamental element (Facione, 2007: 19).



1.2 Presentation teaching strategies in English teaching books

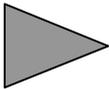
Due to the high importance of presentation skills and to the fact that nowadays they represent a requirement for most professionals, a huge number of books on this topic have been published. In this section, the focus will be on analysing several books designed especially for teaching English in order to see how the units on presentations are structured. The purpose of such an analysis is to see to what extent exercises requiring the use of critical thinking skills were incorporated in these books.

In the introduction of his book – "*English for Business Communication*" – Sweeney (1997) announces the readers that the two key objectives of the course are to develop communicating techniques in socialising, telephoning, presenting information, participating in meetings and negotiations, and to develop the students' knowledge of the language used in the above-mentioned areas. In the four units included in the module dealing with presentations, the focus is on theoretical aspects such as discussing strategies for preparing, as well as for delivering a successful presentation. Most elements refer to the proper behaviour of the speaker, to correct ways of displaying visual materials, dealing with the audience or signalling the shift from one part of the speech to the next one. At the end of each unit, there is a language checklist of expressions students might use in their own presentations. There are no activities requiring the students to use their critical thinking skills in order to assess the logical coherence of the presentation they listen to. Also, there are no references to these skills in the activities which require students to prepare presentations by themselves.

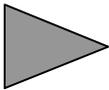
Powell (1996) does not mention anything about the necessity of using critical thinking skills in order to be able to deliver good presentations or to assess other people's speeches. In the introduction of his book, he states that his main purpose

is to teach language and techniques that would help speakers express themselves in an enthusiastic way, as enthusiasm is the first condition for a good speech. Although the book is extremely comprehensive in terms of vocabulary, the activities suggested in it focus on developing the readers' proficiency in presenting in English, overlooking aspects regarding critical thinking. In one of the sections references are made to the necessity of providing sound argumentation by giving explanations regarding "*the reasons behind the facts and their likely causes and effects*" (Powell, 1996: 29). However, this idea was used only as an introduction to the presentation of expressions used to refer to causes, effects and purposes. The activities which followed focused solely on making sure the students are able to use these linguistic devices in sentences.

Comfort (2004) designed a practical video-based course whose purpose is to help people become familiar with the skills that would allow them to deliver effective presentations. The focus is of course on communication and language skills. In one of the sections there is an activity meant to encourage students to become aware of how they could organise information and ideas related to a given topic. But the structure they are encouraged to build is a general one, in which no references are made to the causal relations between the elements students want to include in their presentation.



Practical aspects: Analysis of presentations



2.1. Analysis of presentations: general comments

In order to better illustrate the necessity of adopting a new approach to helping students develop presentation skills, an analysis was made based on presentations delivered during the first semester of the academic year 2007-2008 by first-year students at the Faculty of Finance, Insurance, Banks and Stock Exchange, at the Bucharest University of Economics.

Before the presentations, students participated in two seminars in which the structure of presentations was discussed. The conversations and exercises carried out during these seminars focused on the way in which information should be structured, on vocabulary elements such as signposting devices, as well as on delivery elements such as body language, attitude towards the audience or time management. During these discussions, the teacher discovered that the students had little practice, both in delivering presentations and in attending such events, and that students avoid both instances as often as possible. Concerning the latter situation, the students expressed their reluctance to perform such an activity, as

they consider they lack the necessary patience and active listening skills, which makes them lose interest rather fast. When asked about the reasons for avoiding delivering presentations, students stated that the two main reasons are the fact that they feel uncomfortable presenting their ideas in front of an audience and that they are afraid they might actually forget words or sentences, which would make them interrupt the entire presentation. The discussion continued from this point revealed that during the preparation stage students prefer to actually memorize their entire presentation than to rely just on the main ideas included in it. This is the reason why, when given the choice in their academic life, they prefer written forms of examination to oral ones, although they admit that the first often requires more of their time. In terms of elements they perceive as relevant for a successful presentation, the students mentioned aspects such as an interesting topic, a confident attitude and a strong voice, good body language, good management of visual devices and a good preparation, both in terms of research and in terms of pre-delivery of the presentation itself. Although some of them also made reference to the structure of the presentation, further discussions on this topic showed that they were focusing on the ideas included, not on how they would relate to each other or to the main issue.

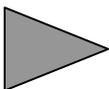
In order to fulfil the task of preparing and delivering their presentations, the students were told that they should work in pairs or individually, and they were given a list of topics to choose from. The topics covered the issues discussed during the semester and ranged from suggestions that required mere research to those which were more complex, as research had to be accompanied by personal interpretation of facts. In order to appeal to as many students as possible, the proposed subjects were expressed in different ways, as statements, as questions or as suggestions to comment on quotes. In order to ensure variety during the seminar when the presentations were delivered, there was a rule, which stated that there had to be maximum two teams speaking about the same topic. Most of the students expressed their preference for the first two types, avoiding the effort of structuring their presentation around an idea expressed by someone else, and choosing this option only if there were no other choices available. Thus, only 14% of the presentations focused on interpreting quotes, 17% focused on presenting facts discovered as a result of mere research, while 69% of them were related to answering questions and discussing statements.

There are several aspects that have to be mentioned in relation to the way in which the presentations were prepared and delivered. Maybe the most obvious one for the teacher was that most students did not make the effort to actually understand the topic and what it involves before coming in front of their colleagues to present their ideas. Many presentations lacked spontaneity, and, even worse, it soon became clear that there were cases when the content of the presentation was learnt by heart, without the student internalizing any of the ideas. As a result, forgetting a specific part led to anxiety or even to the incapacity to continue expressing ideas on the

subject, even when the teacher prompted the students to say whatever they think about the topic in discussion.

Another issue (or difficulty) refers to students' abilities to work as a team, coordinating their ideas and sharing their knowledge. According to the teacher's observations, as well as to the students' comments after the completion of all presentations, in many cases the entire content was prepared by one of the students, while the second received it and took it as a final form, without bringing his or her contribution to it. Students defend such a practice by saying that they are used to sharing responsibilities in such a way, and that they expect their passive partner to do the same for them when a project for another subject is required. Furthermore, they state that it is difficult for them to get together and work, both due to the lack of an appropriate study space and the lack of free time outside the university.

Regarding the vocabulary used, some students have the tendency to use lexical units they are not familiar with, which sometimes makes it difficult for them to pronounce or in extreme cases even to remember these words, a phenomenon which is also accompanied by the incapacity to provide an on-the-spot synonym. Also, they seem to have understood that the audience is looking for signals to show them exactly where the presentation is going, so the speakers make full use of these signposting devices, but without really understanding their functions in the structure of the text. The most frequent instance in the analyzed presentations is the use of the summarizing devices, which usually appeared somewhere in the second half of the presentation, but which were followed by the introduction of new ideas, that belonged more to the content itself, not to the final part. Another example concerns the linguistic units meant to signal the introduction of ideas defending a previously stated position: many students do nothing else than present a totally new idea, which has no causal connection with the point of view it seems to be related to according to the signposting used. There also seems to be a lack of coordination with respect to the sequencing devices. Thus, many students who start presenting the several aspects of interest by using expressions such as "firstly" or "first of all" forget to also signal the next new items that appear later in their speech. Last but not least, the same lack of coordination appeared at the level of contrasting or adding devices such as "on the one hand ... on the other hand", as there were many cases when only one of the two halves of this structure was actually presented.



2.2 Analysis of presentations from the perspective of critical thinking skills

If they appear only in some occasional instances, the inconsistencies mentioned above could signal nothing more than a lack of lexical coherence in the English language or of sufficient preparation of the content of the presentation. However, when they occur with such frequency as noticed when analysing the first-year

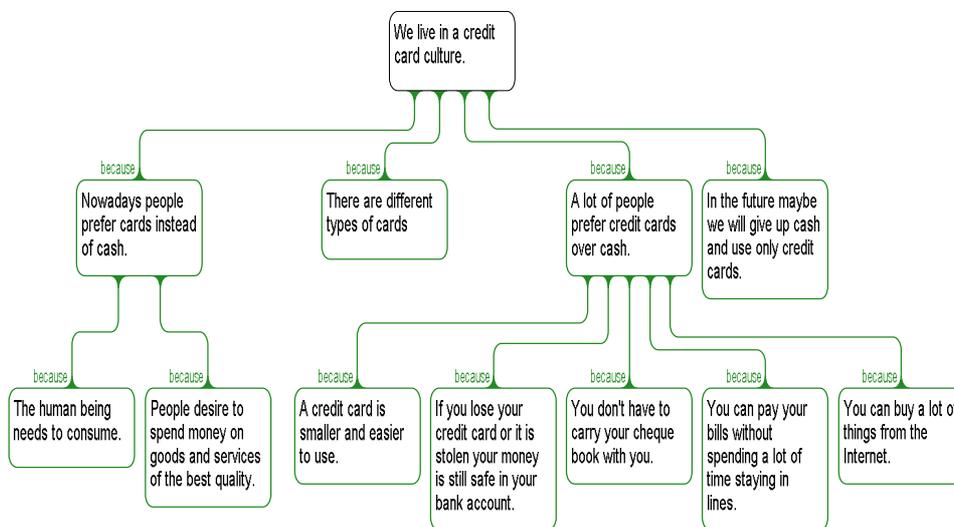
students' presentations, they may be, at best, symptoms of insufficient practice in preparing and delivering presentations, or, at worst, an indication of the students' inability to logically assess and organise ideas.

Unfortunately, in many of the students' presentations there are indeed some issues concerning the in-depth understanding and analysis of the main topic, as well as of properly presenting the logical connections among different ideas. Several presentations have been analysed from the perspective of critical thinking skills, as described in a previous section of this article. The purpose of this is to provide better understanding of the main sources of error in presentations, as well as to suggest possible solutions to reduce the frequency of these errors occurring in the future.

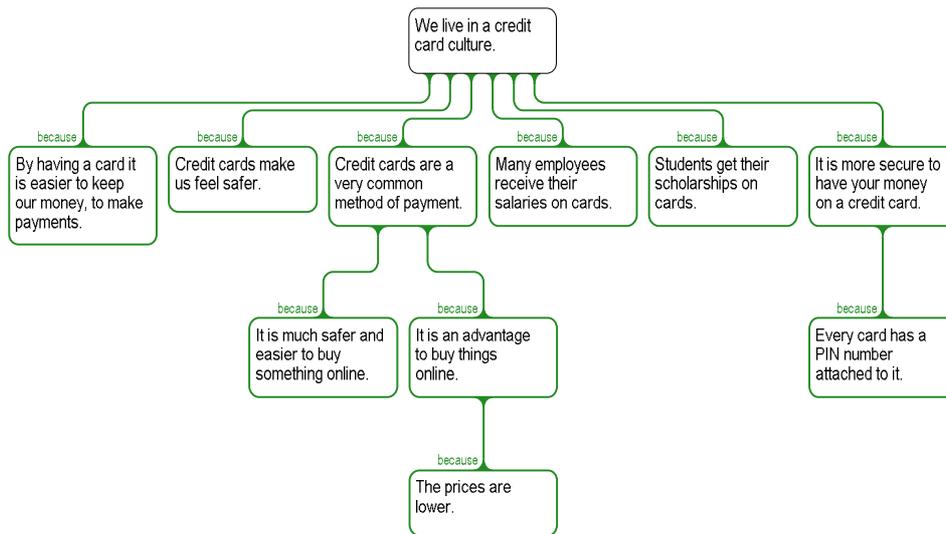
The presentations commented below were theoretically meant to focus on the authors' opinions on whether we live in a credit card culture or not. The speakers' task was to state their position towards such a claim and defend it by bringing supporting reasons. However, as illustrated below, this has proven to be a difficult goal, as the speakers had problems not only with finding elements that would support their claim, but also with establishing relevant connections, either between the elements they did find and their position, or among the different elements, or both.

Topic: "Do you agree with the fact that we live in a credit card culture? Provide reasons to support your opinion."

Presentation 1



Presentation 2



The first problems appear at the level of **interpretation**, a skill which the participants should use in order to identify the issue in discussion and try to describe it with as little bias as possible. Students should begin by clarifying the meaning or meanings of the claim and of all its constituents in order to avoid a biased or one-sided decoding of the significance of the topic they want to discuss. Once this fragmentation is done, students should decide whether they will approach all the implications or they will choose one particular aspect, and they should be able to explain their choice. After the claim is correctly decoded and a coherent and relevant approach is established, the students have to make sure that they describe the problem and support their opinions without bias, trying to avoid reasons or objections which are based on personal feelings rather than on facts.

However, in the presentations analysed in this section there was little proof of this skill actually being put into practice. The reason why three out of the five presentations delivered on this topic are not structured as an argument map is due to the fact that starting from the beginning of the presentation it was clear that the speakers did not understand the main claim and what it involves. Thus, ignoring the main claim, they stated from the very beginning that they will talk about “the advantages and the disadvantages of credit cards”, or “credit card payment”. It was clear in these cases that what the students did was a partial decoding of the aspects involved by the main claim. Although presenting the advantages and disadvantages of credit cards is somehow related to living in a credit card culture, there does not seem to be a direct causality relation between analysing the various characteristics of a card and explaining why the author believes (or not) that we do live in a credit card culture. In the two presentations whose argument map is shown above there is

such a causality relation, even if the reasons brought to support the claim do not cover a very wide range of aspects. Thus, in Presentation 1, the speaker perceives the idea that more and more people prefer using credit cards over cash as an indication of the existence of a credit card culture. In Presentation 2, the same position is supported by making reference to the fact that cards have become a common method of payment, and by mentioning the fact that nowadays a large number of employees and students receive their salary or scholarship as a bank transfer rather than in cash, which leads to the use of a card to make use of that money.

After they identify the problem and choose a clear position towards a given situation, students should be able to apply their **explanation** skills. This means that it is not enough if they simply state their position, they also have to provide a sound reasoning that supports it. One of the shortcomings of the analysed presentations is represented by the fact that the reasons brought by the students to support their position are mostly based on common knowledge or personal opinions. None of the students took the effort to bring objective facts into discussion, such as for example the percentage of employees who receive their salary on cards or figures showing exactly how much purchasing by card has developed nowadays compared to other methods of payment. Instead, they have built most of their argumentation by focusing on the advantages of credit cards over cash, which in itself does not constitute sufficient proof for sustaining the existence of a credit card culture.

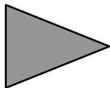
Such inconsistencies could easily be avoided if students were familiar with and able to apply **analysis**, a critical thinking skill which would be useful both for the participants and the audience in identifying and examining the relationships among statements and in detecting fallacies. Also, in order to be able to assess the logical strength of the statements and of the relationships among them, as well as to compare different interpretations and positions, students should be able to make use of **evaluation**, a skill which would allow them to perceive the strength of the relationships established within the argument. Once these two skills are acquired and put into practice, students should be able to see if there are any weak inferential relationships between the statements and make a rational decision on whether to reinforce this connection or to change their initial position.

For example, if they had critically analysed and evaluated the relationships between the elements included in their argumentation, the students would have probably realised that at several levels there is a weak causal relation between elements they see as directly related. Thus, in Presentation 1, the existence of several types of cards and the fact that maybe in the future people will only use credit cards instead of cash for making their purchases can hardly constitute strong reasons leading to the conclusion that we live in a credit card culture. In the same presentation, the weak argumentation goes on when basis for the reasons of the

main claim has to be provided: the preference of people for using cards is motivated by their need to consume and by their desire to get the best value for their money, which definitely does not account for such a preference, as there is no proof whatsoever that cash cannot still fulfil these needs. In Presentation 2 there are also weak connections between the main claim and some of the underlying aspects related to it, as the speaker also has the tendency to support the existence of a credit card culture by emphasising the advantages of credit cards, which in his opinion are safer and easier to use than cash.

Since students are obviously not very familiar with using these two skills in a purposeful way, it could be difficult for them to apply them instantly from the beginning. Unless reasons or objections shock them by their inadequacy, the members of the audience do not usually pay much attention to the various aspects of the content of a presentation and just try to get the main points of the discussion. In their turn, the presenters get so involved in the effort of delivering their speech that they sometimes lose track of what was actually said before. This is the reason why analysis and evaluation should probably be applied at the end of the presentations. Once the speeches are over and the argument map is drawn, students should be encouraged to analyze the discussions, evaluate them and see what aspects could be improved.

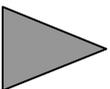
Once analysis and evaluation are done, students should be encouraged to put their **self-regulation** skills in practice. This means they should be asked to double check their own work, revise it and decide whether they can validate it as it is or bring corrections to it. Most of the time this is a difficult part for many people, as it is not easy to become aware of their own mistakes and acknowledge them. Another obstacle is the lack of available time, as many students have the tendency to prepare their presentations only a short time before the actual delivery, which does not allow them the possibility to take some time off after the effort of producing the presentation and then revise it with a clear and detached mind. The most effective way of reinforcing this skill is by discussing the content of the presentation with the students after they deliver it. Once errors are identified, their main task is to stop producing them in the future. Fortunately, students seem to be used with this technique, as many of them tend not to repeat mistakes they have become aware of. Maybe the best way to develop self-regulation skills is by having open class discussions in which all students speak out their opinions about the way in which the presentations were organised. By listening to their colleagues, who act as critical friends, students may become aware of weaknesses in their argumentation that they might have overlooked before. Once this feedback is obtained and understood, it is very likely that the quality of future presentations will improve.



New approaches to teaching presentations

After the analysis of several presentations, some of which were discussed above, it has become clear that the university teachers of business English cannot automatically expect their students to deliver successful presentations just by helping them become familiar with or reinforce their knowledge of lexical devices and economic terms. As already mentioned in other sections, beside aspects concerning fluency and accuracy in the English language, special attention should be paid to elements of logical structure of the discourse and inferential relationships between the ideas expressed and the main topic of the presentation, as well as between the ideas themselves.

In this section, a list of suggestions will be provided, with a view to helping students become aware of some of the critical thinking concepts discussed so far, as well as understand what they could change about their work and try to use the newly acquired skills to improve their performance. In the second half of this section, references will also be made to several drawbacks that would make it difficult for the teacher to apply some of the suggested teaching methods.



3.1 Integrating critical thinking in the teaching of presentations

The first step in encouraging students to make full use of their critical thinking skills could be to help them become familiar with the concept. Although they have already heard of the term, as they have seen that it is a requirement in many job advertisements, especially posted by multinational companies, most students seem to find it difficult to define what critical thinking means. When prompted to discuss this issue in groups and supply an explanation, they had trouble in fulfilling the task, and their answers proved their opinion on the term is not unitary or cohesive at the level of the group. In most cases, the explanations were vague or only covered a specific aspect. For example, many respondents defined critical thinking as the ability to find immediate solutions and to keep your calm in situations of unpredictable crisis at work, ignoring the fact that they also need to apply this ability in order to make normal daily decisions, not only professionally, but also in their personal life. Another common perception of the term is the one according to which critical thinking only focuses on analysing negative aspects and weaknesses, being represented by a severe, exigent view on things, whose purpose is to identify mistakes. References were also made to making and accepting critical comments and being ready to bear the consequences in case someone is proven to be wrong. This is obviously a one-sided and negative perception of the concept, which could

lead to a reluctant attitude from students in using the skill, and especially in allowing their own work to be reviewed by colleagues or other people from this perspective. Other explanations defined critical thinking as the ability to freely express your opinions on various topics, or focused on the self-evaluation aspect of the term. There were also various definitions whose authors obviously had a deeper understanding, as they mentioned the ability to make a thorough analysis, trying to go beyond appearances, as well as to make the connection between causes and effects in order to be able to interpret, comment on and evaluate results, ideas or opinions. There were also several instances when the students mentioned that critical thinking is related to the objective, independent self-evaluation or evaluation of all the aspects involved in an issue in order to be able to adopt a logical approach, to synthesize ideas and make the best decision. Starting from the various explanations given by students, the teacher could encourage them to discuss, compare their views and reach a common definition of the term, which should include the aspects that most of the participants in the discussion agree on. Once this is done, students could be provided with explanations of the term taken from the literature in the field and compare their definition with expert opinions, in order to establish if there are new elements that students would like to add to their own agreed definition. By applying such an approach, the teacher would encourage students not only to consider the semantic ramifications of the term but also, to use their critical thinking skills. This would be helpful in evaluating the strength of those elements included in their explanations as compared to aspects mentioned by other groups, as well as in reaching an agreement regarding which elements should be left out or incorporated in the new, more complex definition. At the same time, once students are actively involved in providing a meaning to the term 'critical thinking', they become more aware of the deeper meaning of the concept, which thus ceases to be a merely abstract expression.

Once students understand the general concept of critical thinking, the second step would be to make sure they know what skills they are supposed to use in order to perform an independent and objective analysis. This should not be a difficult task, as a clear perception of the concept is usually related to an understanding of the strategies attached to it. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, some of the skills, such as analysis, evaluation or interpretation, were included in some of the explanations of the concept of critical thinking. What the teacher has to do at this stage is to encourage students to make reference to whatever other skills they might think of, and then, if necessary, ask them to compare their list with a set of skills mentioned by professional authors.

After all the concepts become clear in the students' mind, it is time for them to prove they can actually put their critical thinking skills in practice. At this stage, it would be useful for students to be helped to understand what an argument map is, as well as why it is relevant for enabling them to perform a thorough interpretation of a discourse or issue that requires resolution. First of all, they should become

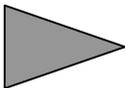
aware of the logical structure any argument should have. They should also understand that it is not enough to support the main claim, and that statements supporting or objecting to a claim also have to be based on sound reasoning. In order to achieve this, the teacher could involve the participants in a game: he or she could write a statement on the board and ask the students to give a reason for or against that statement. The reason or the objection given next should be related to the previous statement, not to the initial sentence. The students have to keep bringing reasons or objections to the previous statements until the teacher decides they understood the purpose of the activity.

Once students prove they are able to build a multi-layered argumentation, the next step is to make them act as critical observers, as they listen to several presentations and discuss the ideas included, and their relevance to the main topic and to each other. During the next listening of the same discourse the students could be asked to draw the argument map which would show exactly how the elements of the presentation are related to each other, then discuss whether or not the argumentation was built on sound reasoning and strong inferential relations. This is usually a difficult task, as teachers often use professionally designed texts, where expert speakers present issues according to a well-organised pattern, and this leaves little or no space for mistakes at any level. Such examples would be both demoralizing and ineffective, as students would probably see little pleasure or practical value in analysing almost perfect examples, in which they are not able to identify weak links. Another disadvantage of such materials is represented by the fact that their focus is usually limited to specific parts of the presentation, as their main purpose is to familiarise listeners with various strategies of starting or ending a presentation, or with using signalling devices to connect various parts of the discourse or to point out a shift to a new idea. A solution to this would be to use realistic materials, such as recordings of presentations delivered by students from other groups. In such a case, the listeners would have to deal with a task they could very well be asked to perform in real life. There may be pronunciation issues or the way ideas are connected could not always be clearly signalled by linguistic devices, which means that the listeners sometimes have to establish the causal relations by themselves, according to the ideas expressed in the presentation, especially if they want to draw the map of that argument. Last but not least, listening to presentations delivered by their peers would offer students the opportunity to identify weak connections or fallacies in argumentation. As the students become more confident, the exercise could be taken one step further. Thus, students could be organised in groups and asked to prepare a presentation. After they have the opportunity to discuss, share ideas and structure them, each group should appoint a spokesperson to deliver the presentation in front of all students in the classroom. While they listen to their colleagues' presentations, students should try to draw the argument map. After the presentation is over, free discussions would be organised about the logical structure and the strength of the inferential connections. The students in the audience would express their opinions

and make comments, and if there are any disagreements related to the validity of a specific aspect, the speakers and their teams would of course have the possibility to defend their position. If it is organised well and all students are involved, such an activity could be extremely useful, both for the members of the audience (who have the opportunity not only to analyse their colleagues' speech, but also to give feedback) and for the speakers, who can later on improve their performance as a result of some of the comments expressed by their peers.

In order to ensure the success of the exercise and to make sure that no important aspects are overlooked, the teacher could suggest to students that they could record their presentations, so that they could replay them later on for a more thorough analysis, especially if during the discussion there were disagreements related to a specific part. Apart from serving as an instrument for providing a deeper insight into the logical relations established among the elements of the discourse, the recorded text can also be useful in terms of making the speakers aware of aspects such as pronunciation, tonality or level of confidence as expressed by their voice. They could also note whether the use of linguistic devices meant to signal causal relations was in line with the logical structure of the speech. This way it becomes easier for the speakers to avoid those instances when they introduce in the text expressions such as "because" or "thus", but without really referring to reasons or consequences.

It is essential for the teacher to remember that if he or she wishes the students to become familiar with the concepts of critical thinking and critical thinking skills, as well as comfortable with applying the skills when preparing and delivering projects, he or she should resist the temptation to adopt a prescriptive approach, and focus instead on trying to create a relaxed and non-threatening atmosphere for the students. This would allow them to freely express their ideas and would ensure that the students validate or modify their opinions willingly, as a result of class discussions and by selecting relevant information from the materials supplied by the teacher.



3.2 Drawbacks

Due to their novelty and to the fact that they require a more complex structure of the seminars dedicated to discussing presentations, the strategies mentioned in the previous section would require changes and adjustments both in material and in human terms. Thus, they would require some special logistics, as well as new study materials, new activities to be designed, and a new attitude both from the teacher and the students. Although the human factor of these changes is probably the most essential, we will start by discussing the material aspects, focusing on the possible lack of available equipment and on issues related to time management.

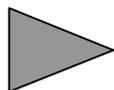
The first objection that would come to most teachers' minds when asked whether they would be able to use the suggested new approaches in the classroom would be about the insufficient, inappropriate or inexistent equipment. Unfortunately, it is true that some of them could face difficulties in being provided with a voice recorder and in being able to play the recorded text on a device that would allow all the students in the class to clearly hear what is being said. Although the first aspect could be easily solved by acquiring a voice recorder, the second problem would require much more effort to solve, as business English seminars are often organised not only in the equipped language laboratories, but also in normal classrooms, which do not always offer proper conditions. Another important obstacle against performing the mentioned changes is represented by the lack of available time. Usually there are 14 seminars each semester, and approximately two or three of them are dedicated to administrative issues and evaluation. This means there are only 11 or 12 seminars left, during which the teacher has to cover the curriculum, that is most often extremely complex, especially in the case of faculties whose students only study English for one or two years. For example, students in finance (the subjects of the study presented in this article) only have English classes during their first year at university; afterwards, it is no longer offered to them, not even as an optional subject. In these conditions, the teachers' task is to help students develop as many language skills as possible in a short period of time, which sometimes prevents them from being able to dedicate more time to a specific aspect. Discussing the structure of presentations is usually done in one or (maximum) two seminars, and this time is probably not enough for the strategies mentioned in the previous section to be applied successfully and for critical thinking concepts to be understood and put into practice. At the same time, the English language teacher is also expected to encourage the students to become aware of the linguistic devices that should be used in their presentations. Due to the insufficient time available, it is also difficult to allow the students to discuss their colleagues' presentations, as well as to receive feedback: since students are evaluated on their own presentations, the main purpose is to have everyone deliver their speech in the allocated time. Most often, after all presentations are delivered there is little or no time for free discussions, and at that point the students themselves seem to have lost their interest in the topic. A potential solution to this problem would be to design a one-semester course based solely on oral communication. Such courses do take place, but those who benefit from them are students who have already graduated and participate in Master programmes. Although the utility of these courses at a more advanced stage of professional development and maturity in thinking cannot be denied, teachers should bear in mind that students will be required to deliver presentations throughout their entire academic life. Hence, they need some guidance from the beginning, otherwise they will just keep repeating the same mistakes, without even being aware of it, due both to their insufficient training and to the lack of feedback coming from their colleagues or from the teachers.

Once the first two obstacles mentioned above are overcome, serious consideration should be given to the reaction of the people involved: using an integrated approach and trying to establish a correlation between critical thinking skills and presentation skills could become a major challenge for all participants in the process, both students and teachers.

Many university teachers could simply refuse to undertake this difficult task because they think that if the students were not able to become familiar with discourse structuring techniques during their previous years of study, then it is not worth the effort to try helping them do it now, and they choose to focus solely on presenting information about linguistic devices and presentation-related vocabulary items, expecting the students to struggle by themselves in order to improve any aspects they are not comfortable with. However, this attitude cannot be logically supported, as the same argumentation can be applied in the case of the language items. Most students have probably spent much more years studying English than logic. Thus, they should be more familiar with linguistic devices than with critical thinking skills needed for delivering good presentations. Teachers would therefore have more reasons to teach critical thinking than to teach presentation-related vocabulary. Even in those cases when teachers are willing to provide assistance beyond their main area of activity, there are problems related to the fact that the teachers themselves are not familiar with the concept of critical thinking. Although they can recognise fallacies and weak causal relations, they are not able to name them or to explain clearly to the students why they consider that a specific line of reasoning is not sound enough. This is why in many cases they prefer to leave things as they are, and when it comes to giving feedback they either avoid providing it or they limit their comments to familiar elements. When teachers do try to provide comments and show the students where they are wrong, if they are not fully capable of explaining exactly what the mistake is this leaves the students unconvinced of the validity of the teacher's perception. Thus, the students may leave the classroom without giving a second thought to what they were told; they may avoid repeating the same mistake with that specific teacher, but they may also repeat it in projects prepared for and evaluated by another teacher. Theoretically, the solution to this problem is an easy one, as there is a wide database of literature in the field of critical thinking, which teachers could access in order to get the information they need. However, just reading about it may not be enough, and more guidance could be required. This guidance could be obtained by participating in training sessions on this specific topic or by formal or informal communication with persons who are more familiar with critical thinking, both in theory and in practice.

In their turn, students could resist the idea of becoming active and willing participants in the suggested activities. One of the reasons of this resistance could be that they are not theoretically familiar with some of the newly introduced concepts. Another is related to their fear of being criticised, even if by their own

colleagues. They might therefore refuse being recorded or feel uncomfortable once their presentation is over and discussions start. Unfortunately, it could take a long time for the teacher to persuade the students to see the utility and fun involved in such an activity. This task can be made even more difficult by the fact that, during their academic life so far, the students (especially those in their first year at university) have seldom received any other form of feed-back than a final grade. This final grade may have given them some information about their overall performance, but did not help them very much in understanding what aspects they had to improve. Apart from their fear of being assessed, students are also uncomfortable with being asked to do the evaluation themselves. Due to this feeling, as well as to their lack of training, they might simply refuse to participate and pretend they have no opinions related to their colleagues' work, or they might focus only on the positive aspects, in order not to upset the others, as well as to secure their protection from criticism when their turn comes. When they do decide to take full part in the activity, there might be a tendency to let personal preferences or grudges prevail over objectivity. It is up to the teacher to create a non-threatening environment for the students, and to make sure no hard feelings appear during the discussions.



Conclusions

In today's society and labour market a lot of value is placed on both presentation and critical thinking skills. Employers need employees who are able to attract customers by being able to persuade them of the advantages offered by the company. They also need people who are able to make reasonable decisions based on facts, not personal opinions. Presentation and critical thinking skills are also important in everyday life. With so many choices to make and so little time to get meaning across, it is important for people not to waste time and opportunities by not being able to make themselves understood or by not being able to understand the others. As a response to these needs, teachers have become aware of how important it is to help their students develop these skills. Unfortunately, most teachers of business communication in English lack the proper training and materials that would allow them to incorporate critical thinking activities in the structure of their seminars. Thus, most of the methodological books still suggest strategies based mainly on linguistic approaches, while practical books which focus on teaching English suggest mainly exercises meant to enhance the students' proficiency in using this language.

By carefully analysing presentations delivered by students, it becomes obvious that many of them lack the ability to structure their discourse in a coherent manner and to build a strong and sound argumentation. Therefore, the teachers have to offer their students guidance which covers not only linguistic areas, but also areas

related to the use of critical thinking skills. Although the process of implementing the new approach may be difficult especially in the initial stages, teachers and students can no longer deny the fact that in order to create powerful and effective presentations they do need a wider range of skills than the ones covering general strategies and vocabulary.

The activities suggested in this article and the comments related to what changes could be brought are not comprehensive and inflexible. They are just meant to make the readers of this paper become aware of the possibility of integrating critical thinking skills in the teaching of presentations. Teachers can then decide to adopt and adapt some of the approaches suggested in this paper, or design other activities they might perceive as relevant.

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