

THE IMPACT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING ON THE ACQUISITION OF SOFT SKILLS SUCH AS CRITICAL THINKING AND EMOTIONAL LITERACY SKILLS

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Abstract

The present day desideratum for the educational systems is to develop life-long learning skills and to support learners in the acquisition of soft skills as well. There are various fields concerned with the development of these skills and a closer look at the overlapping areas may be beneficial. Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences highlights the characteristics of the interpersonally and intra-personally minded people. The proponents of the theory of emotional intelligence incorporate these two types of intelligences as core domains in which emotional literacy skills are rooted. Finally, the theory of speech acts includes these skills as accompaniment in the verbal interactions of human beings. As part of the present study, three textbooks from the series CAREER PATHS: *Agriculture, Hotels & Catering* and *Tourism* issued by Express Publishing UK have been analyzed with respect to their potential of developing students' critical thinking and emotional literacy skills by means of the speaking activities they suggest. The conclusion that can be drawn is that the dialogues have the potential of enhancing students' interpersonal abilities while encouraging polite communication – especially through the use of modal verbs (*can, could, may*) – and critical thinking by the extensive use of questions. However, in terms of emotional vocabulary, there is a scarcity of emotional words being employed, with a frequent occurrence of concepts such as: *happy, angry, sorry, worried*, which may seem a bit restrictive. Consequently, the mission of the English courses and educators is to extend the area of the communicative situations that rely on the diversification of this specific vocabulary, which may contribute to a broader understanding of people's interactions in the long run and to a genuine embracing of a relevant linguistic material.

Key words: soft skills, speech acts, emotional intelligence, emotional literacy, emotional lexis

The key soft skills required on the labour market nowadays pinpoint to a holistic perspective on the personality of the future employers and employees: attitude, communication (both listening and speaking skills), work ethic, teamwork, leadership qualities, time management, decision making, conflict resolution, critical thinking, networking, empathy and problem-solving. Critical thinking also appears among the key competences for lifelong learning enumerated in The Recommendation on eight key competences for lifelong learning adopted in May 2018 by the European Commission. In the Foreword of the document, the Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport highlights that: "Critical thinking, media literacy and communication skills are some of the requirements to navigate our increasingly complex world".

A comprehensive image of all the factors involved in critical thinking is probably offered by Okan Sarigoz who enumerates as critical thinking skills: reasoning, analyzing, problem solving, reading comprehension, scientific thinking,

creative thinking, judgment, deciding accurately (Okan, 2012) In addition, in the Stanford Encyclopedia the feelings are enumerated among the components of the process of critical thinking – and there is a certain emphasis on the types of feeling that may arise in encountering a problem or a dilemma and those that ensue together with finding a solution or the answer. Critical thinking entails thus a wise positioning in a world abounding in information, claims, arguments and demands in order to be able to identify their level of clarity or ambiguity, their value (*true or false*), their nature (*subjective or objective*) and their level of persuasiveness so as to adopt the right attitude and embark on a particular and appropriate course of action (Epstein, 2005).

The concept of emotional intelligence assigns emotions a major role in self-knowledge and knowledge of others and relies on two essential pillars – that of self-awareness and the awareness of others. Daniel Goleman's framework offers a detailed picture of the aspects related to the personal competence in terms of knowing and

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mastering one's own emotions and to the social competence which refer to empathy and social skills (Goleman, 1998). These two major areas of emotional intelligence overlap with Howard Gardner's concept of intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences (Gardner, 2011). The intrapersonal intelligence involves self-knowledge, self-regulation, self-control, better said, knowledge of your inner being and the way it is affected by and affects the others. The interpersonal intelligence refers to the capacity of becoming aware of the others' emotions, behaviour and the motivation behind. Gardner lays great emphasis on people's capacity to 'label' emotions (Gardner H., 2011, p. 253) and in this respect he is in line with what the original proponents of the concept of emotional intelligence – John D. Mayer and Peter Salovey – include as a core aspect in their first branch of their Four-Branch Model of Emotional Intelligence: the “ability to express emotions accurately, and to express needs related to those feelings” (Peter, 1997).

Athanasios Drigas and Papoutsis Chara reach some extremely valuable conclusions in their recent article *The Need for Emotional Intelligence Training Education in Critical and Stressful Situations: The Case of Covid-19*: “The need for the development and cultivation of emotional intelligence from the very beginning, starting from the field of education, is strongly apparent so that the child and later the adult can cope with stressful situations. Studies have shown that people with high emotional intelligence can better manage and mitigate stress and adopt strategies of resilience and control.” (Drigas, 2020) Undoubtedly, the language teachers – through the impact they have in the educational process during their classes – may contribute to the training and consolidation of these skills, especially those related to communication and behaviour. As Tayebeh Zarezadeh acknowledged a few years ago “English teachers are expected to utilize an educational curriculum to promote and reinforce their learners' emotional intelligence so that they can expand the corresponding and relevant skills (such as understanding personal feelings and others, sympathizing with others and controlling stresses.)” (Zarezadeh, 2013).

Since the students studying at Iași University of Life Sciences are confronted with various life contexts during their training years and are being prepared for various domains that rely on human interaction in various degrees and for various outcomes, the study of foreign languages can supply the appropriate context in which communication can be shaped according to various scenarios. Among the functions that languages

fulfill, two are closely related to the intrapersonal and interpersonal components of emotional intelligence, transposed in the area of language study by Downing and Locke: “One is to express our interpretation of the world as we experience it (sometimes called the ‘ideational’ or the ‘representational’ function); the other is to interact with the others in order to bring about changes in the environment (the ‘interpersonal’ function)” (Downing, 1992). They further state that: “Interpersonal meaning between speaker and hearer is expressed by choices from different areas of the language which include modality, intonation and attitudinal lexical items.” (Downing, Locke, 1992). From this perspective, a dialogue represents the best instance in which the ‘ideational’/ ‘representational’ serves as a basis for and determines the ‘interpersonal’ function. The ideational or factual information may be reiterated with the aim of obtaining clarification or further details so that a future course of action may be determined.

Depending on the communication context, the intention of the speaker and the relationship with the interlocutor, speech acts fall into three categories: the *locutionary* – the production of an utterance and the performance of the act of speaking, the *illocutionary* – an act that can be classified according to its force (stating, praising, threatening, warning, promising, etc) and the *perlocutionary* – an act meant to have an effect upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the interlocutors (Austin, 1962). Bridging this to the area of language learning, Downing and Locke see each verbal mood as being associated with an illocutionary act, for example the declarative with making a statement, the interrogative with asking a question, the imperative with giving a directive and the exclamative with expressing an exclamation (Downing, 1992). The authors emphasize the illocutionary force of various declarative clauses, depending on the linguistic means by which they are constructed (Downing, 1992). Consequently, depending on the intonation, a statement can be interpreted as a question; *such*, *so* or other intensifiers confer exclamative force to a declarative; modal auxiliaries (e.g. *can*, *could*, *should*, *must*, *have to*, etc.) can be used with the illocutionary force of commitment, directive, offering advice, making suggestions, or apologizing. The *perlocutionary* force of the utterances – encouraging or persuading someone to resort to some course of action – can only be assessed by the impact of the dialogue on the speakers and on the students as the audience.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

For the present paper there have been analyzed the dialogues in three textbooks from the series CAREER PATHS used as material in the English courses and seminars: *Agriculture, Hotels & Catering and Tourism*.

Each textbook is divided into three books / sections, each book containing a number of 15 lessons with the degree of linguistic competence ranging from A1 in the first book to B1 in the third book. Each lesson contains one model dialogue and based on this example the students are required to produce their own dialogue in a semi-guided manner. Therefore, a total number of 135 dialogues from the three textbooks have been analyzed with the aim of identifying in the texts the elements pertaining to the areas of critical thinking and emotional intelligence and their potential of raising students' awareness with regard to the force of linguistic elements involved in verbal interactions to support reasoning, analyzing, problem identification and solving, and deciding accurately the effect or the course of action expected. Each dialogue was analyzed with respect to the expressions used to show availability to respond to questions or requests (e.g. *How can I help you?*), the modal verbs used to exert a certain illocutionary force (e.g. expressing obligation or offering advice) and the lexical items (e.g. adjectives, adverbs or various phrases) used to render the emotions of the interlocutors.

Notwithstanding the series strong emphasis on the training of functions (giving opinions, expressing agreement and disagreement, persuading, asking for explanations, etc.) which support a steady development of the critical thinking skills of students, a closer analysis of the contents of the dialogues has brought to light some insightful facts regarding the variety of linguistic means used to express or trigger emotional states.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A closer analysis of the three textbooks has revealed the fact that they encourage speakers to handle factual information in a clear manner and with the appropriate degree of politeness – since their aim is to enrich the students' knowledge with relevant vocabulary on the selected topics.

The dialogues as such highlight some other essential traits the learners should acquire such as the preparedness to justify acts and take initiative, take risks and bear the consequences. The critical thinking skills assist the interlocutors in deciphering the real meaning and intensions of the speakers in the precise context depicted. Critical thinking also seems to be reinforced through the use of 'if' and of *If-clauses*. Speculating with regard to conditions preceding or triggering certain

actions sets the speakers in thinking mode following various courses of action. Here are some examples from the dialogues:

What if we increase

If this pricing strategy improves sales, then you'll lower the overall price later.

So, if I planted..., it would...

If I understand you correctly,

The words that really point to an emotional state on the part of the speakers occur with a diminished frequency: *happy* (when satisfied with the outcome of an action or expressing the willingness to be of service), *glad* (referring to emotions experienced when meeting people), *worried* (with respect to the outcomes of a specific activity), *sorry* (referring to the incapacity of achieving something or inability to offer certain services), *afraid* (expressing the state of the speaker unable to perform an activity on the spot), *nervous* (when relating situations that occurred unexpectedly and when an intervention may have triggered unexpected or even unpleasant results), *pleased* (with the choice or the outcome), *excited* (with regard to obtaining a new position) or *exciting* (experience, trying out a new product), *calm* (as piece of advice), *impressed* (with a certain product). Taking into account the fact that there are at least 3000 core vocabulary words for emotions [4] the amount present in the textbooks is rather limited and limiting the potential for identifying and using a variety of emotion concepts confidently.

Here is one example from *Hotels & Catering*, Book 2, Unit 7 *Evacuation*, in which only one word refers to an emotional state. Nevertheless, the situation depicted comprises a whole array of emotions that only the students can name as the indirect audience involved:

Guest: *What's going on? What's that noise?*

Hotel employee: *That's the fire alarm, sir. There's a small fire in the hotel.*

Guest: *Fire? Oh my goodness! Where is it?*

Hotel employee: *It's in a guest room on the third floor.*

Guest: *The third floor! That's near my room. All of my things will burn!*

Hotel employee: *Sir, it's very important that you stay calm.*

Guest: *But what about my belongings?*

Hotel employee: *There's a sprinkler system. It will protect your items if the fire reaches your room.*

Guest: *What am I supposed to do now?*

Hotel employee: *For now, we have to evacuate the building.*

Guest: *I don't understand. I thought you said it was just a small fire.*

Hotel employee: *That's correct. But we're evacuating the building as a precaution.*

Guest: *I see. I guess I need to find the nearest exit then.*

Hotel employee: *That's right. Just take the stairs down to the ground level. You'll see the exit at the bottom of the stairs.*

The sudden change of mood and ready compliance with the hotel employee request may be perceived in this particular example as a bit unnatural. However, it certainly offers a good insight into how to react in extreme situations. Such a dialogue may be exploited during the English classes with students role-playing it from the perspective of various hotel guests with different temperamental profiles.

Other words that have a high recurrence are those that indicate satisfaction, compliance, approval or reassurance on the part of the receiver of the message and are expressed by means of adjectives: *great, excellent, nice, interesting, fantastic, wonderful, fine, helpful* – all of them acting as a bridge between the cognitive and the emotional abilities of the communicators. The use of adverbs also reinforces meaning and triggers certain emotional reactions in the listeners: *certainly, definitely, exactly* or *fortunately/unfortunately* as they combine cognition with a certainty able to set speakers in a positive mood in which one may nourish hopes.

The nouns that pertain both to illocutionary and perlocutionary acts are represented by the words: *pleasure, concern*. Moreover, the verbs that fulfill a double role in revealing the state of the speaker and attempting an emotional reaction in the interlocutor are also rather scarce regarding their occurrence: *appreciate, apologize, improve/be committed to improving, fear* (e.g. 'consumers fear that genetically modified foods are not safe'), *worry about, be interested to/ in, hope* (e.g. 'we're hoping our product will attract attention').

The scarcity of emotion concepts is nevertheless compensated by the use of modal verbs which possess the force of triggering intended perlocutionary effects. The modal verbs that occur with a certain frequency in all three textbooks are those referring to:

- ✓ Possibility: *may, might, can*
- ✓ Probability: *could*
- ✓ Ability: *can*
- ✓ Obligation: *have to, must*
- ✓ Giving advice/ making recommendations: *should*
- ✓ Asking for or granting permission: *can*
- ✓ Offering to help: *can, could, may*
- ✓ Necessity: *need*

Modal verbs have the force of turning statements of 'facts' into 'potential situations', especially in constructions introduced by verbs such as: *hope* and *expect*, in which the speaker projects expectations with a subtle hint to the affective state that may accompany the fulfillment of the desired action.

The analysis has also brought to light mirror reactions '*I feel the same way*' which have the function of showing the awareness of what the other is feeling and the fact that it is a shared emotion. '*I'm not sure*' on the other hand may lead to various emotional reactions and verbal interactions since people expect certainty and confident answers from people that fulfill certain functions or have leadership positions. As an example of such an exchange I include a dialogue from the textbook *Agriculture*, Book 1, Unit 5 *Water*:

Farmer 1: *I'm worried. My vegetables won't survive if this drought continues.*

Farmer 2: *I feel the same way. My lettuce and cucumbers aren't doing well.*

Farmer 1: *What are you going to do about it?*

Farmer 2: *I might expand my irrigation system.*

Farmer 1: *That could be very expensive.*

Farmer 2: *I agree. But I don't know what else to do.*

Farmer 1: *You could always plant drought-resistant vegetables next year.*

Farmer 2: *That's a good idea. It will cost less. But it won't help this year.*

The elements pertaining to critical thinking are obvious as the interlocutors are discussing a problem and suggesting solutions. Regarding the emotional input, I have underlined the words that are explicitly expressing emotions. However, as can be noticed, there are more emotions accompanying the cognitive processes and exchanges and these can be inferred from the use of *if*-clauses, modal verbs, or from the choice of tenses and their value – affirmative or negative.

In order to trigger milder responses to seemingly negative utterances, the speakers insert in their statements words such as *seem* and *guess* which sound less definitive and open the space for further research and thinking and do not force sudden conclusions. *Quite* or *enough* also belong to the category of words that have the intended effect of softening the utterance and inviting the interlocutors to further pondering on the topic and getting all the elements necessary for the big picture. Another intensifier that occurs frequently is *too*. Accompanied by the intended intonation it is also meant to spark certain reactions: '*That's too much!*', '*That's too bad.*'

The critical thinking skills may further be trained in interactions that use expressions perceived differently in various cultural contexts. Thus, the expression ‘*That’s not a bad idea*’ frequently used in the US may sound disheartening or mildly appreciative for some students who are not familiar with the culturally enforced meaning which is actually a very positive one in the American context.

A last example is from the textbook *Tourism*, Book 3, Unit 6 *Difficult Guests*. A possible class activity would be to ask students to underline in the text all the words of the airport worker that they consider as inappropriate or as possible triggers for the traveler’s attitude.

Traveler: *It’s very important that I get on the next flight to Melbourne. Are there any tickets left?*

Airport worker: *I’m sorry, ma’am, but I can’t help you right now.*

Traveler: *Why not?*

Airport worker: *There were other customers here before you.*

Traveler: *So what am I supposed to do?*

Airport worker: *Please wait in the queue.*

Traveler: *I don’t have time to wait in the queue!*

Airport worker: *I understand your frustration, ma’am. But I have to serve the customers who have been waiting in line. It’s only fair.*

Traveler: *Look ... I’m already here. Why don’t you just help me?*

Airport worker: *I assure you that I will do everything I can to help you ... when it’s your turn.*

Traveler: *I can’t believe this! What kind of airline is this anyway?*

Airport worker: *I’m going to ask you to please wait in the queue.*

Traveler: *You know, this is the worst service I’ve ever had. I’ll tell everyone I know that Hermes Airways doesn’t care about its customers!*

Airport worker: *Ma’am, I really want to help you, but I need you to lower your voice.*

Traveler: *And what if I don’t?*

Airport worker: *I’m afraid I’ll have to call airport security to escort you off the premises.*

As can be noticed, even if the linguistic means used by the airport worker seem to abide by a code of behaviour and certainly by the regulations imposed by a specific context, from a psychological point of view they only have the opposite effect and stir the undesired reaction in the hearer. A good challenge for the students would be to have them replace the words or the whole replies so that they may trigger a positive reaction from the traveler. The entire structure of the dialogue may take a totally different turn.

Traveler: *It’s very important that I get on the next flight to Melbourne. Are there any tickets left?*

Airport worker: *I will check that as soon as possible. Till then, would you be so kind as to wait in the queue?*

Traveler: *I would certainly do that if only you could tell me if there is any chance for me of getting on that flight.*

Airport worker: *I can assure you we will do our best to find a solution.*

Traveler: *Do you think there is enough time for me to catch that flight?*

Airport worker: *I will look into the matter as soon as I finish serving the customers who have been waiting in line.*

Traveler: *Thank you. Maybe they will be so kind as to let you check that for me now, unless they are in a desperate situation as I am. I would really appreciate your help and their understanding.*

CONCLUSIONS

All three textbooks excel in constantly exposing learners to functional language used in various situations related to the contexts depicted. The dialogues in all the books have the potential of enhancing students’ interpersonal abilities while encouraging polite communication and critical thinking by the extensive use of questions. However, in terms of emotional vocabulary, the scarcity of emotional words being employed may seem a bit restrictive. Nevertheless, this scarcity is compensated by the use of other linguistic means such as the use of modal verbs, adverbs, nouns, intensifiers or *if*-clauses.

While the area of agriculture seems to rely on a rather factual, neutral linguistic input, those of hotel services and tourism will bring forth instances in which the emotion vocabulary may be as diversified as the types of situations that could arise. The communicative instances in the books bear the potential of sparking further discussions as to how much the dialogues may be branched into obtaining detailed information, making inferences and associations, and striking beneficial deals, all in a constant exercise of being aware of the self and others involved in the verbal exchanges. Since the real life situations will be more varied than any book may envisage, the language course may be the best context of speculating on such contexts and exercise possible reactions while critically and constructively reflecting on them.

The role that the language teachers may assume in this complex enterprise of supporting students in the acquisition of critical thinking and emotional literacy skills would be that of raising students' awareness of the lexical concepts and of the contexts in which they occur, the train of thought beyond the verbal exchanges, the impact of these concepts on the interlocutors and the effects intended. Moreover, they may act as enforcers of good practices through the personal model they offer.

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