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## FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING AS A TOOL FOR PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

**Abstract.** The article presents foreign language learning as a tool for problem-solving skills development of university students. Solving problems contributes to our self-actualization. Problem-solving skills are the result of independent thinking and searching. The author considers developed problem-solving skills as one of the aspects of professional and ethical culture, which has cognitive, emotional, axiological and activity components, and problem-solving method forms, to varying degrees, all these components. The author describes some professional and ethical topics, Socratic questions and steps of problem-solving skills practice done in foreign language classes.

**Keywords:** problem-solving skills, soft skills, critical thinking, Socratic dialogue, foreign language, university students

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## ИНОСТРАННЫЙ ЯЗЫК КАК СРЕДСТВО РАЗВИТИЯ НАВЫКОВ РЕШЕНИЯ ПРОБЛЕМ

**Аннотация.** Статья представляет иностранный язык как средство развития навыков решения проблем, способствующих самоактуализации личности. Навыки решения проблем являются результатом самостоятельного мышления и поиска. Автор рассматривает развитие навыков решения проблем как один из аспектов профессионально-этической культуры студентов вузов, которая имеет когнитивный, эмоционально-чувственный, аксиологический и деятельностный компонент, и метод решения проблем формирует, в той или иной степени, все эти компоненты. Автор описывает ряд профессионально-этических тем, сократические вопросы, а также этапы практического освоения навыков решения проблем на занятиях по иностранному языку.

**Ключевые слова:** навыки решения проблем, мягкие навыки, критическое мышление, сократический диалог, иностранный язык, студенты вузов

Viktor Frankl wrote that modern education system avoids confronting young people with ideals and values in order not to seem authoritarian or directive. There is a tendency for making educational process as comfortable as possible and protecting students from any strains. Viktor Frankl called this a homeostasis theory. This theory in the aspect of education claims that society should not make too many demands on the students not to make them stressed and so on. It is typical for consumer society which suffers not from too many moral demands, but from lack of them. As a result, young people, being deprived of a useful moral strain, try to find this strain in unhealthy things such as alcohol, drugs, destructive ideas etc.

In contrast to the homeostasis theory, Viktor Frankl argued that personal development needs such a thing as a moral strain which means facing moral dilemmas and trying to solve them accord-

ing to a person`s ideals and values. This process generates new senses and makes one`s life more meaningful. As Viktor Frankl claims, only through implementation of sense and values a person can self-actualize [1].

Solving problems (especially ethical problems) is an integral part of our life. Every day we have to decide what is good and what is bad, what is useful and what is unuseful. Solving problems contributes to our self-actualization. Problems-solving skills are the result of independent thinking and searching.

Problem-solving skills are soft skills that are required from a professional nowadays. This skill can be identified as one that involves cognitive and creative abilities [2]. University students learn to reflect, subject their ideas to careful examination. Their thoughts, feelings, actions, behavior and values (and also the thoughts, feeling, actions, behavior and values of other people) become the subject of such reflection, examination. We suggest that foreign language learning can be an effective tool for problem-solving skills development. Our findings are presented and proved in the thesis "Formation of professional and ethical culture of university students" where problem-solving method forms, to varying degrees, cognitive, emotional, axiological and activity components of professional and ethical culture [3].

Problem-solving skills as one of the aspects of professional ethical culture of university students can be developed with the help of problem-solving tasks or, in other words, analyzing problematic situations. *What is a situation? A situation* is a set of circumstances given and actions taken in these circumstances [4]. The main aim of analyzing a problematic situation is to solve the problem through questioning and answering, evaluating the circumstances and consequences of each possible action. Professional ethical problematic situations can have a range of specific features different from others problematic situations. For example, they may have conflicts of personal and social interests, values. Viktor Frankl said that a personal responsibility becomes apparent only in a certain situation of one`s life [1]. People in general and professionals in particular need to know how to behave or how to act. Sometimes while analyzing a situation more than one problem is recognized and solved. Students can even predict a chain of problems and consequences of the actions taken. This evidences a high level of problem-solving skills development of students.

Our choice of problematic situations was based on their potential professional ethical orientation. These are the following: the management pressure and illegal actions of subordinates forced by the management, workplace bullying, mutual concealment at work, exploiting cheap labour, keeping quiet about pollution, redundancies, wage cuts, withdrawing faulty products, being miserable at work, business etiquette etc.

When choosing didactic tools we followed the principle of visual expression – short films and cartoons, pictures – where the characters help the students to get involved in the situations emotionally.

A Socratic dialogue helped the students to build discussion. This type of discussion is a process of step-by-step questioning and answering which leads to solving complex problems (professional ethical ones in particular). The students learnt a certain set of questions which are typical for such a discussion. For example:

- *questions for clarification*: “Let me see if I understand you; do you mean...or...?”;
- *questions that probe purpose*: “What is the purpose of...?”, “What was your purpose when you said...?”, “Was this purpose justifiable?”;
- *questions about viewpoints and perspectives*: “What is an alternative?”, “Does anyone see this another way?”;
- *questions that probe concepts*: “What is the main idea we are dealing with?”, “What main theories do we need to consider in figuring out...?”;
- *questions that probe reasons, evidence and causes*: “What are your reasons for saying that?”, “Is this good evidence for believing that?”, “What do you think is the cause?”;
- *questions that probe inferences and interpretations*: “Given all the facts, what is the best possible conclusion?”, “How are you interpreting her behavior?”, “Which conclusions are we coming to about...?” etc. [5].

Furthermore, the questions used for a Socratic dialogue were mostly:

1. *alternatives questions*: “Do the staff members act like this on their own volition or under the management’s pressure?” etc;
2. *general negative questions*: “Doesn’t this behavior lead to collapse of the whole system?” etc;
3. *disjunctive questions*: “Personal traits of one’s character don’t justify this behavior, do they?” etc.

We took the following steps in practicing a Socratic dialogue to develop problem-solving skills of our students:

Step 1. Reading an abstract from one of Plato’s “Dialogues” where the main character Socrates and his disciples discuss existential issues and come to certain conclusions through consecutive questioning and answering. Analyzing its structure and features.

Step 2. Learning questions (for example, from *The Foundation for Critical Thinking* – website: [www.criticalthinking.org](http://www.criticalthinking.org) – which help students build their discussion and reflection more organized and effective in order to solve a problem or clarify an idea.

Step 3. Presenting Socratic questioning in case study concerning professional ethical issues (two of the cases are presented in the study guide “Personal Development for Career Growth” [6].

Step 4. Making their own Socratic discussion/dialogue based on the information learnt and the skills practiced. Topics can be offered by the teacher or chosen by students independently. The dialogues can be made in a written form and/or presented orally to the class/audience.

Foreign language learning has proved its effectiveness as a tool for problem-solving skills development. Foreign language learning has great potential for developing not only academic and language skills, but also many soft skills which are essential for successful career and personal growth; and the dose of a useful strain that students experience during problem-solving practice will be a creative power to achieve this goal.

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