

***English – No Problem* and the Problem-Posing Approach**

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Introduction/Rationale

The *English – No Problem!* series is unique among integrated skills English-as-a-second-language series in its utilization of a modified problem-posing approach. Problem-posing fits naturally with the principles of adult learning that characterize learners as being self-directed in their learning and seeking purpose and practical application from their educational experiences. *English – No Problem!* has been developed on this foundation in order to provide adult learners with ample opportunities to apply their emerging English skills as they examine and transform their own lives and communities. In this sense, *English – No Problem!* is also rooted in a key premise of second language acquisition theory -- that language acquisition is facilitated by giving learners opportunities for communication that relate to their own lives. Finally, through its problem-posing approach, *English – No Problem!* aligns with the federal emphasis of the early years of this new century on civic education, in which English language skills are applied as a tool for participating in the community and negotiating social systems.

Background

Problem-posing as an educational approach originated in the work of Brazilian educator and social advocate Paulo Freire. Freire worked with the poor and oppressed in Brazil and Chile during the 1950s and 1960s. In his work, he practiced his belief that development of literacy skills should result in social reform. For Freire, problem posing was rooted in the premise that the purpose of education should be human liberation. In this sense, his ideas had much in common with the earlier learner-centered theories of the educational constructivists, who believed that learners gain knowledge by building their own social realities. Freire's approach also had similarities with proponents of critical pedagogy, who believed that literacy instruction should be contextualized within a framework of social activism and transformation. Freire promoted a style of education that demands much more than the decontextualized instruction of basic literacy and numeracy skills. Instead, in the problem-posing approach, true knowledge emerges from critical reflection upon one's social reality and action taken in response to this knowledge.

Features of Problem-Posing

The following features characterize a problem-posing approach:

- It is learner-centered, and its content derives from learners' lives and experiences.
- Learners and teachers are equal participants in the learning experience.
- Teachers regularly assess learner needs.
- Educators need to uncover blocks to learner learning, whether they are emotional, structural, or socioeconomic.

The core phases of a problem-posing approach are listening/investigating, dialogue, and action.

Through careful *listening*, the teacher can identify themes and issues that resonate with learners, and plan lessons accordingly. Following these lessons, learners can *investigate* their communities and workplaces, gathering information by interviewing friends, family, and coworkers; interpreting documents; and collecting familiar objects such as work tools and cultural artifacts. Investigation gives learners the chance to use their English outside the classroom and develop critical thinking skills.

During the *dialogue* phase, learners can codify a critical issue that has emerged during the listening phase. A problem-posing “code” can take the form of a written dialogue, story, photo or other visual, skit, or song. These codes can depersonalize the issue, promote critical thinking, and direct learners toward action, the ultimate goal of the problem-posing approach. During the dialogue phase, leading up to the action phase, teachers should be careful not to impose their own solutions to the problem or issue.

Actions become the essential application of learning: Learners can use their English skills to transform a situation in which they are personally vested. Actions can be captured in many forms, including class or group projects, learner stories, written or visual codes developed by learners, letters to the editor, or learner-produced videotapes.

Problem Posing Reflected in the *English – No Problem!* Series

Through the problem-posing approach used in *English – No Problem!* learners not only practice and apply their language skills, but also come to understand that they already have a surprising amount of knowledge about the issues that are critical in their lives. Problem-posing is embedded in such structurally uniform elements of *English – No Problem!* as written and oral codes that begin each unit and each lesson, Class Chats (learner-to-learner interviews), and end-of-unit projects. Almost every lesson includes an opportunity for learners to gather information pertaining to the issue from their classmates. The series’ codes – presented in graphics, conversations, and narrative readings – are followed by the problem-posing questioning strategy – simplified for the beginning levels -- integral to the dialogue phase of the method. Learners are asked to describe what they see, define the problem, share similar personal experiences, question *why* there is a problem, and strategize what they can do about it. The unit projects in *English – No Problem!* exemplify the transformational nature of the series by giving learners the opportunity to use their new language skills to resolve an issue that relates directly to their personal lives.

The following unit synopses, one from each level, help to illustrate the problem-posing nature of the series.

Literacy

At this level, New Reader’s Press has greatly simplified the problem-posing approach. Nonetheless, all language instruction – no matter how basic – is presented in a real-life context that learners can apply to their own lives. For example, Unit 6 focuses on the challenges a busy family faces when they have transportation problems. The codes

include photos of the rushed mother driving a van – the family’s only vehicle -- to take her children to school and herself to work on a rainy day, followed by a photo story of the mother and father negotiating who will use the van another day. Learners interview each other about their personal transportation situations, asking the question, “Do you drive to school?” At the end of the unit, learners take action by mapping their community and forming emergency car pools.

Low Beginning

Unit 7 focuses on the issue of communicating with a child’s teachers. The codes include a photo story about a busy high school student, her report card, a conversation between her mother and aunt, and a narrative about a parent-teacher-learner conference. Learners interview one another about problems they have at school and activities they (or their children) have in addition to school. They then take action by completing an informational chart that includes the names of key school personnel and reasons to contact them, a class schedule, and a list of extra-curricular activities. Learners can complete the chart with information about their school and schedule or those of their child. Then they use this information to role-play a phone call or write a note to school to report an absence, reflecting tasks they themselves are likely to carry out outside of class.

High Beginning

The issue of Unit 3 at this level is balancing one’s busy life. The code in the unit opener is a photo of a stressed young mother, Silvia, watching her children and doing laundry while wishing she had time to play tennis. Learners are asked to identify and analyze the problem and relate it to their lives. Lesson codes include Silvia’s work schedule, a conversation with the doctor about stress, and a letter from Silvia’s daughter’s teacher. Learners “investigate” the issue and practice targeted language skills by asking their peers about their daily schedules and general level of health. They take action by giving a brief oral presentation about how they balance their own lives.

Low Intermediate

Unit 3 presents the issue of neighborhood and workplace safety. Codes include a photo and caption introducing the unit’s central character, Miguel, clearly injured, walking home from work through a dilapidated neighborhood. Lesson codes include Miguel’s accident report form from work, a brochure about fire safety in the home, and a conversation between Miguel and a police officer. Learners interview one other about concerns over safety problems at home and about safety problems in the workplace. The unit concludes with a project in which learners make posters with safety rules for specific places in their communities or workplaces.

High Intermediate

The issue of Unit 9 at this level is moving off welfare and into meaningful employment. Codes include an introductory photo and caption featuring Martha meeting with her employment counselor. Lesson codes include a job brochure, Martha’s “notes” on resume writing, and a conversation between Martha and a job interviewer. Learners investigate this issue by asking classmates about their work experiences, personal

qualities, and skills. They take action in the unit project by preparing their own draft resume.

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