THE USE OF CASE STUDY IN BUSINESS ENGLISH
LANGUAGE TEACHING: FEEDBACK FROM INSIDERS

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ABSTRACT

Case study, as an example of Task-based learning, has been prevalent in English for specific purposes courses for some time. There have been a considerable number of papers presenting the benefits and opportunities of utilizing case study in Business English classes, but they are almost state-of-the-art, little empirical work has been recorded. Thus, this study is to seek the feedback from lecturers and students concerning the criteria for a well-designed case study, the stages to implement, purposes, benefits and challenges posed by case studies. Five lecturers and 56 students participated in the study. They were surveyed via open-ended questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Content analysis has been used, revealing that there are seven stages in dealing with a case study, all of which are logically coherent according to both lecturers and most students. There is no clear answer in relation to the criteria for a well-designed case study since they were simply picked up from a Business English textbook for their usability and availability. Both instructors and students realize the ultimate purposes for using case study are to get prepared for real life business situations and develop soft skills such as problem-solving or computer literacy. Most students find the most challenging element is their limited knowledge in doing business; as a result, they resort to the Internet to look for the solutions and require more instructions from teachers. Lecturers, on the other hand, point out that students’ low motivation confronting their practice the most and have managed to boost their learning autonomy. These are hoped to effectively bridge the gap between students’ and lecturers’ expectations in their use of case study.

Key words: case study, Business English, ESP

INTRODUCTION

The majority of students studying for a degree in business and economics are mostly familiar with the method of case study. In fact, English for Specific Purposes in general and Business English in particular has been usually associated with case studies which are to bring the English classes closer to the real world. This teaching practice derives from the idea of Task-based Language Teaching in which students are supposed to use English and their business content knowledge to fulfill a task. Opportunities as well as challenges have been documented in spite of a lack of empirical studies; hence, this paper is to testify those remarks in reality.

Case study is regarded as an active method which offers a number of merits in teaching business English, therefore, students’ and teacher’s sharing about their benefits have been surveyed. Also, difficulties, the stages in deciding which case to use, and how to exploit each case for the learning purposes were under scrutiny. Empirical data are to modestly fulfill the gap in the literature about the use of case study in varied contexts.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Case study

A case study describes a problematic real life situation that needs to be solved. Business case studies begin with the description of a company profile followed by additional information usually presented in the form of charts, graphs and tables. Case studies are the scenarios that apply the concepts learned in the classroom in the "real life" situation. Usually they are presented in narrative form, and often include problem solving, links to some course readings or raw materials, and discussions by groups of students, or the whole class.

Case studies were first used in law to evidence verdicts given by judges and to teach law students. In the 1930s of the 20th century cases were introduced in psychiatry. Case reports were written to document diseases and to consult the cases with other specialists. Today, all medical specialties use case reports for didactic and research purposes. Case studies started to be used in business in 1967 when Strauss and Glazer created their ‘grounded theory’. In the mid-70s of the 20th century they were introduced in business schools. Harvard Business School has been using this method intensively to teach future managers how to solve real-life problems. Today, the case study method is widely used as a teaching and researching tool in medicine, psychology, anthropology, sociology, economics, management, finance and other sciences where the presentation and analysis of a real problem is of relevance in teaching and researching.

An effective case study is one that, according to Davis (1993):

- tells a “real” and engaging story
- raises a thought-provoking issue
- has elements of conflict
- promotes empathy with the central characters
- lacks an obvious or clear-cut right answer
- encourages students to think and take a position
- portrays actors in moments of decision
- provides plenty of data about character, location, context, actions
- is relatively concise.(Davis, 1993)

Main steps in applying a case study in a Business English lesson

A number of steps have been described, but the first one, which has been agreed on, should be pre-teaching the language required to discuss the case study. It is important to select the skill that should be focused on and teach the specific language. If we take meetings as an example, we could do the following: provide students with useful language input for both the chairperson and the participants, such as the language of agreeing and disagreeing, hedging, expressing opinions, checking understanding, interrupting, referring back, reaching agreement, finding a compromise, coming to a consensus, making your point, making recommendations, inviting people to speak, opening and closing the meeting, etc. If we take negotiations as an example, we could pre-teach the language of putting forward a proposal, agreeing and disagreeing with a proposal, imposing conditions, making concessions, asking for clarification, summarising what has been said, postponing a decision or playing for time, concluding a deal, etc. After finding a solution to the problem the students make presentations in groups. Students should be familiarised with presentation skills, such as introducing the talk, indicating the structure and sequences of your talk, moving from one section of your talk to another, highlighting, summarising, inviting questions, etc. Business English materials which have structured and
lexical approach to business skills (Emmerson, 1999a,b,c; Mascull (2002), Goodale, 1997) have been successfully used in the Business English classroom for practicing and developing students communication skills. If students hold a press conference, the teacher should preteach the skills of asking and answering difficult questions, using various intonations ranging from neutral and/or polite to forceful and/or aggressive. (Cotton et. al,2011a).

The described steps are as follows:

- Case study introduction. Students may be given to read the case in advance. The questions and discussion points provide a means for the teacher to check that students have understood the key points.
- Defining the problem. Students discuss the situation in the company, analyze and discuss quantitative data, make SWOT analysis and present company goals.
- Problem solving. Students are divided into groups of four or five students to analyse the problems and find solution. Students participate in a meeting or negotiation to focus on finding a solution to the problem. In case of a meeting a chairperson is selected to lead the meeting and an agenda is drawn up. Students should take detailed notes during the meeting. They identify options open to the company, evaluate the options, select the best option and draw up an action plan.
- Presenting the solution(s). Students present their action plan in groups. To ensure active participation of all students we ask the students to share the presentation speaking time equally.
- Evaluating the solution(s). Students discuss the different solutions. A consensus should be reached on the main points raised in the presentation.
- Follow-up(Optional). Students may be asked as a follow-up activity to write an email, memorandum, a letter, a report, etc. Supplementary material giving suggestions and advice on how to develop students written communication has been used at Business English classes (Taylor, 1999, Comfort et al., 1998).
- Feedback. The ideal Feedback phase involves learners evaluating their performance themselves. The next best thing is for them to evaluate each other. Only if they do neither of these should you use your notes to make comments yourself (CrowtherAlwyn2007).

**Benefits of using a case study in Business English Language Teaching**

Thanks to their basic didactic qualities, case studies offer the following opportunities:

- to practice all language macro-skills: reading, speaking, listening and writing (Council of Europe, 2001; Richards & Schmidt, 2002),
- to develop the productive language skills in a very intensive way,
- to meetings (Brieger, 1997),
- to analyze, present and discuss graphs, tables, charts and other quantitative data,
- to practice analytical and managerial skills,
- to incorporate develop communicative competence (Burges & Head, 2005),
- to practice business skills of presenting, negotiating, chairing and participating in the components of business culture and business ethics to a language course,
to practice intercultural skills (M. Byram, 1997; 2000; 2005).

What needs to be mentioned here is the fact that case studies are a very good example of task-based activities which represent the student-centered approach. They can be used in Content-and-Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (Language Policy Division 2006) at a university level when teaching business English to first and second year students.

In his book, Frendo presents equally encouraging opinions on the case study method used in dealing with intercultural training in a business English course. He says that teachers “use case studies or critical incidents in order to present learners with a problem that needs to be solved. Because they are not personally involved in the situation, they can discuss the issues objectively, and decide upon a course of action” (2007, 121). Critical incidents focus on differences from a practical rather than theoretical perspective. Of course, sometimes learners do not find a solution, or find that there is no perfect solution, but this is a reflection of the real world rather than to practice intercultural skills (M. Byram 1997, 2000, 2005). When they are presented sequentially, so that students receive additional information depending on the situation unfolds, and can continue to analyze or criticize the situation or the problem (Herriet, 2014).

According to Lawrence, a good case study is: “the vehicle by which a chunk of reality is brought into the classroom to be worked over by the class and the instructor. A good case keeps the class discussion grounded upon some of the stubborn facts that must be faced in real life situations” (Lawrence, 2010).

Whereas in the area of business, law and medicine case studies are used most widely, this method of teaching may as well be an effective instructional technique in many other subjects. As an educational strategy, case studies have a number of advantages. They “bridge the gap between theory and practice and between the academy and the workplace” (Barkley, 2005). They also give students opportunity to practice recognizing the problem parameters, identifying and articulating ideas, assessing options for actions, and arguing different points of view.

More specifically, the following merits of using case studies at Business English language classes have been reported. First, it is a fluency based activity allowing the spontaneous use of the English language. Another benefit is that it simulates an authentic working experience requiring them to get involved in managerial communication. It also provides a high motivation for English learners as they are thrown into real life situations and given the authority to decide how to solve business problems. Last but not least, it is a useful task-based activity representing the student centered approach.

Challenges when using case studies in business English classes?

The challenges when using case study seem to be surpassed by the benefits given the fact that most of the papers primarily report the merits when applying this innovative method. Also, most of the presented difficulties were merely subjected to authors’ observation and conclusion. For example, Popescus (2016) indicated six disadvantages to teachers such as the (1) the overwhelming content of each case study, (2) time and energy investment in the pre-teaching stage, (3) the feeling that students do get much improvement in language skills due to the conservative approach, (4) difficulties in assessment, (5) the lack of comfort with role shifting from teachers to facilitator, and (6) the unpredictability of case studies without a certain frame or definite outcome.

The aforementioned challenges are only from teachers’ perspectives. The existing body of literature still needs more empirical data to provide a more comprehensive outlook on the barriers posed to both teachers and students during case study practice. That is the reason why this study has been conducted.
METHODOLOGY

Research questions
The current research is to seek the answer to the following research questions:

1. How are case studies being applied in business English classes in the research context?
2. What are the benefits and challenges of using case studies reflected by both lecturers and students?

Research context
The program of Business English was integrated into the Faculty of English Language Teacher Education of a university in Hanoi, Vietnam in 2009 besides the other two majors, namely English teacher and interpreter education.

For the four consecutive semesters (Year 1 and Year 2), students who enrolled in this program were instructed business English along with academic English. The text book in use is Market Leader (Cotton, Falvey & Kent, 2010) with level ranging from Pre-Intermediate to Upper-Intermediate. There are two classes each week. In the first session, students are instructed the content in textbook and received teacher’s guide on the case study whereas in the second session, they are given more time to practice and prepare for case study performances before completing a writing follow-up activity. There are totally eight cases in each semester, and students have to prepare for all of them. Then in four fixed weeks according to the course guide, there are case study presentations in which groups of students pick randomly the case number before taking turns to demonstrate a business meeting, a negotiation, or a discussion as required.

Participants
Five university lecturers and 54 students were involved in the study. Four out of five lecturers have taught Business English for 5 years, the other one was experiencing his first year teaching. They all graduated from University of Languages and International Studies, Faculty of English Language Teacher Education. 54 students were all in their first year at university. After applying for ULIS, they then enrolled in the Business English Program.

Data collecting instruments
Open-ended questionnaires were delivered to examine the participants’ points of view concerning the use of case study. The questionnaire for lecturers encompasses eight open-ended questions focusing on the frequency of using the case study in their teaching practice, the criteria for choosing a case, the benefits, challenges and their solutions to overcome those difficulties. The student’s questionnaire, similarly looked for their responses in the same areas, but half of the questions are close-ended with given clues. Moreover, there were follow-up interviews to help the researcher illuminate puzzled lines in the questionnaire.

Data analysis methods
The data were analyzed by means of qualitative content analysis, which means that the analysis procedure includes the five steps subsequently, namely, “transcribing”, “coding for themes”, “looking for patterns”, “making interpretations”, and “building theory” (Dornyei, 2007, p.246). After transcribing all the classroom audio files and interviews, I closely examined the transcripts to seek for the similarities and differences among responses to group them, and finally, made interpretations in response to the research questions.
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

**Stages in applying case study**

Interestingly, in spite of working in the same program, teachers and students have different recognitions of the steps they have to undergo to fulfill a case study. Even though both parties indicated that it has been all written in the course guide, teachers responded that there were nine while most students claiming five phases during a case study.

The majority of students agreed that the first step is getting divided in groups, then getting the instructions from the teacher before working together to prepare for the case and complete the case study report. Next, all the group members rehearse for the role play. Finally, they have a writing follow-up activity which can be a report, a minute of meeting, or most frequently an email. Those are five common steps students report about their case practice, only a tiny minority included the stage of receiving feedback from teachers. The interviews reveal that usually they did not count feedback as a step as they were not required to do any activity at this time. Probably this idle stage has caused them not to take this stage seriously enough. Nearly all students surveyed were satisfied with this process as: “All the members were involved and there were speaking, writing, and reading activities which aided me to better prepare my role play.” Some reflected that due to the “time constraint”, “the given time between the steps is too short”, which always made them feel under-prepared when delivering the role-play.

On the other hand, teachers described nine to 11 stages when a case is applied in their class though this variation may stem from wording because the general working procedure has all been delineated in the course guide. Here is a meticulous description how a case is dealt with in Ms. A’s class.

- Step 1. Teacher introduces the case to students (area, topic).
- Step 2. Teacher instructs students summarize the basic information and the problem of the case (in the form of the case study report included in the course guide).
- Step 3. Teacher lets students discuss to summarise in pairs.
- Step 4. Teacher asks 1-2 students share the case study summary in front of the class and get feedback from other students.
- Step 5. Teacher writes the summary on the board after collecting comments from students and the teacher.
- Step 6. Teacher ask 1-2 students summarise to assure they have thoroughly understood the content of the case.
- Step 7. Teacher divides students into groups and assigns the roles
- Step 8. Students read the role card carefully in 10 minutes, prepare language items needed to fulfill the role.
- Step 9. Students work in groups and work out the solution in 20 minutes. Teacher walks around, listens, observes, takes notes, and sometimes proposes some counter-arguments.
- Step 10. Groups role play to report the result.
- Step 11. Teacher comments on language use, manner as well as evaluates the solutions of each group.

All the teachers manifested their satisfaction with this procedure as they can closely monitor students’ work and may offer help when needed.

**Benefits**

All the teachers made a consensus on the benefits that case studies offer them. They believe students can all develop their language skills, build up the background knowledge of the
business world with accumulated vocabulary and experience, and develop soft skills such as making presentations, teamwork, or computer literacy. Last but not least, students are thought to have motivation and power when taking roles of CEO, managers or directors.

Students all cite the similar benefits when case studies are applied. However, in response to the question if they themselves have those developments, one-fifth of the students shared they “do not make any progress or if yes, very little”. This is because, as elucidated by themselves, they felt there was a gap between what they were doing and the real world. The found the cases along with the in-class activities not “real” and “not motivating enough”.

**Challenges**

The challenges encountered teachers originate from three factors, namely, students, time constraint and themselves. Almost all the teacher agreed that:

“Students are not as active, creative and hard working as they should be in examining and practicing the cases”.

“Many students have low English proficiency, even lower than the targeted level (B2) so they have many difficulties in understanding, practicing role-play, and writing as a follow-up activity.”

Another common difficulty shared by all teachers is the limited time. Given the low degree of student autonomy, teachers find in-class time not enough for them to give instructions as well as monitor the working procedures of students.

Furthermore, nearly all the teachers were not trained in business, their major is English Language Teaching. To teach these classes, they have to self-study without any formal training; therefore, dealing with tough issues such as risk management or merger and acquisition, they do not feel confident.

Lastly, below is a remark that is worth considering for course coordinator. “The repeated process has become somewhat boring to both teachers and students.” Thus, it is suggested that the number of case studies should be less for a higher motivation of students.

Students expectedly listed a number of difficulties which could be categorized in three groups, namely, limited background knowledge in business, in-cooperative partners, and time constraint. Many students claimed that the cases were “beyond their understanding”, the problems are “too complicated”, which leads to the fact that many of them found cases “unsolvable”. In order to handle this, most of them have resorted to the Internet, hoping for some similar cases with suggested solutions. A few of them asked senior students, only two chose to ask teacher for more help.

Irresponsible partners also cause the process to become harder. “Other members didn’t read the background information given carefully or didn’t prepare well, so it is very time-consuming when discussing or it’s hard to assign roles for those people.”

Another source of complaints for students is the overwhelming number of case studies through a semester (eight cases) and the limited time given between the preparation stage to performance. This can be in line with the remark of one of the teachers about the “boring repeated working process.”

**CONCLUSION**

Case studies are arguably beneficial in business English classes as pointed out in a great number of papers. The current research has confirmed that with benefits reported by both teachers and
students. Nevertheless, there exist a number of difficulties which may prevent the optimal learning of students. Teachers themselves have managed to offer students assistance as much as they can, but there should be more things to do for better results from the stand of students and course coordinator.

REFERENCES

AUTHORS
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