

Methodology for Using Case Studies in the Business English Language Classroom

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This paper reflects on the types of case studies available to language learners and teachers and elaborates a methodology on how these case studies can be exploited to maximise student talking time in the language classroom. Not all case studies are the same and with different levels of difficulty and skills trained, the choice of case study is tantamount to the success of your class. Case studies are extremely rich in content and can provide the learner with the potential to consolidate already acquired knowledge and train specific language and managerial skills. Language teachers inexperienced in the use of the case study method may be inhibited by the content-based nature of the case study and therefore shy away from using case studies in class. This teaching methodology should help teachers plan their classroom to ensure effective execution of a case study.

Case Studies in the Language Classroom

What do teachers do if they have advanced language learners, who may have certain grammatical, lexical or pronunciation problems but for the most part are at ease in their L2. This is a problem we face constantly in our language classroom and we found that case studies provide the answer to the above dilemma. The case study method has been used in many fields in third level education and also lends itself nicely to language learning. The next question may be where to find suitable case studies which are not too content-led and do not presuppose an in-depth knowledge of a specific subject matter. As the main aim of the language teacher is not to teach content but rather improve the student's communicative competence and oral proficiency in the L2, case studies written by language teachers and adapted to the language classroom are more appropriate than case studies written by business lecturers. There are various publications on the market which respond to the language teachers' needs. While some books offer simulations with prescribed roles (Crowther-Alwyn 1997; 1999), others integrate mini-cases at the end of each chapter dealing with a specific topic such as international marketing or finance (Cotton, Falvey & Kent, 2000; 2001). As far as interactive case studies go, two distinct types of case study can be identified: those that provide the learner with targeted content input to practise a specific skill such as negotiating, interviewing, problem-solving or decision-making (Castler & Palmer, 1989) and those which are more free to interpretation and call on the teacher to choose the preferred methodology and classroom strategy (Witte 1999).

Advantages of the Case Study to the Language Teacher

Many teachers shy away from using case studies in the classroom situation for many reasons. First of all, they may feel that they will be engulfed in the content aspect of the case study and lose face before their students. Secondly, they may not be comfortable with the role shift in their teaching - from teacher to facilitator. Finally, teachers who are used to a transmission style of teaching may feel that teaching is not really happening if they use simulations or case studies.

However, the advantages of case studies are numerous. Some of them are set out below:

1. to develop critical thinking and reflective learning in the learner.
2. to improve the student's organisational skills - as case studies are sometimes very dense in information, the key is to condense this information into logical sections and organise them so that a clear picture of the problem/issue can be understood
3. to enhance communication skills - case studies can be used to improve the student's written and oral communication. Non-verbal communication skills are also practised by using case studies
4. to train managerial communication skills such as holding a meeting, negotiating a contract, giving a presentation etc. Case studies force students into real-life situations to require them to get involved in managerial communication.
5. to encourage collaborative learning and team-working skills in the language learner.

The Case Study Classroom

I have divided this section into three parts:

1. **Case study introduction** - deals with the preparation of the case study, the introduction of a problem solving analysis and the pre-teaching of LSP (in this case, I use the example of meeting skills)
2. **Case study class** - here the class is divided into sections to include meetings, presentations of findings and discussion of recommendations.
3. **Debriefing the class** - the teacher gives feedback on language mistakes, managerial skills and the meeting documents and support materials used.

1. Case Study Introduction

It is extremely important that the case studies are well prepared in advance so that each student knows what his role is. It is not sufficient just to give the case study to the student and hope that they will understand how to use it. This is the mistake made by many teachers unfamiliar with the case study method. There are many ways of introducing the case study to your students.

Here is a list of steps that should be completed during the case study introduction class.

1) Read the case study thoroughly with your students. Here you can deal with any lexical or grammatical issues. You may also like to ask your students to represent the background information in a visual form. Use the blackboard or flipchart to get a clear picture of the company background. An example is shown in Figure 1. As you can see in this example, the main information is extracted from the case study, which will then be used later for further analysis.

- **Company Name**
 - Elmex-Newton
- **Turnover**
 - \$1.4 m
- **Profit in 2001**
 - \$500 ,000
- **Number of Employees**
 - 4,800
- **Head Office**
 - New York
- **Product Range**
 - White goods

Figure 1. Example of visual representation of background information in a case study

2) Provide the students with some input on how they should analyse the case study. The problem solving analysis below is an example of how to get the students to analyse the case critically.

- a) Read the case several times.
- b) Define the main issues/problems.
- c) Set out the firm's objectives.
- d) Identify options open to the firm.
- e) Draw up some criteria to evaluate the options chosen.
- f) Select the best option.
- g) Decide on how the option should be implemented.
- h) Draw up an action plan to implement the solution chosen.

3) Pre-teach the language required to discuss the case study. There are many publications on the market for teaching meeting skills, presentation skills or negotiation skills. It is important to select the skill you would like to focus on and teach the specific language. If we take meetings as an example, we could do some of the following:

- refer students to web sites to read up on the skill being practised. A web search will reveal any number of interesting sites.
- If students have access to libraries, then they can read up on meeting skills in one of the many communication books on the market
- brainstorm some key concepts of meetings such as type of meetings, people at a meeting, verbs, etc (see the worksheet in Appendix 1.)
- move on to the language of meetings - provide the students with useful language input for both the chairperson and the participants such as the language of contradicting and disagreeing, interrupting, taking the floor etc.
- familiarise the students with the documents of meeting - the form and content of agendas, minutes and memos. This should provide the student with more language input such as *AOB*, *matters arising out of the last meeting*, *absentees*, etc.
- divide the class into small groups. You can either ask them to form the groups themselves or you can form the groups based on your class lists.

2. Case Study Class

Students should be divided into two small groups (maximum six students) to discuss different aspects of the same case study. Therefore, it is a good idea to find a case study that has two distinct parts. You must remind the students that they do not have all the information they need to solve the case but based on the information available, they can make recommendations and come to preliminary decisions. You can also inform your students that in real life situation in business, we do not have all the facts required to solve a problem.

In a one and a half hour session, the class time is divided into three half hour slots:

- Meeting (30 minutes) - Groups (Group A and Group B) meet to discuss their part of the case study.
- Presentation (15 minutes per group) - Group A present their findings to the other group and vice versa.
- Discussion (30 minutes) - all students come together to discuss the findings and make recommendations.

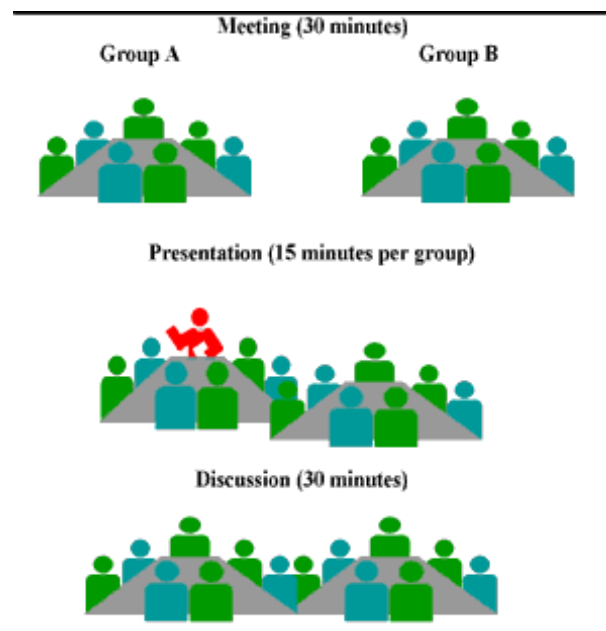


Figure 2. The case study classroom layout

Meeting (30 minutes)

Students are divided into two groups (Group A and Group B) of four-six students to discuss their part of the case study. A chairperson is selected to lead the meeting and an agenda is drawn up. Students can be asked to prepare the agenda in advance and ensure everyone has a copy or they can write their agenda on the flipchart. Students discuss and provide recommendations, which they then represent graphically on transparencies or on the flipchart/chalkboard. You should impress on the students that their visuals should be clear, concise and coherent and long sentences are unacceptable. The students should then prepare their presentation. The facilitator should ensure that the chairperson does not monopolise the presentation but lets the other students have equal speaking time.

Presentation (15 minutes per group)

The findings of Group A are presented to Group B and vice versa. This should take approximately 15 minutes for each group including questions. Students must take detailed notes in order to participate actively in the third part of the lesson. Students will need to clarify the issues their group did not deal with by asking questions and repeating. This section should be treated as information exchange and the facilitator should prevent further discussion of the points presented. In order to include active participation of all students in this section, you could ask the students to share the presentation speaking time equally.

Discussion (30 minutes)

A discussion of both parts ensues whereby the students compare and contrast the various findings and suggestions made. Everyone should be encouraged to participate and a consensus should be reached on the main points raised in the presentation. This further elaboration of the items on the agenda will facilitate the writing of the detailed minutes, which should be prepared as homework.

Finally, the facilitator asks the students to prepare the minutes for the following week. The minutes are prepared in groups of three so that the students can consolidate their ideas on paper.

The transparencies and the agendas are collected by the facilitator for analysis and correction.

3. Debriefing Class

All case study classes need to be debriefed to include the language, the skills (in this case, meeting and presentation skills) and the support documents and written communication (the transparencies, the agenda and minutes). We will now look at these elements in more detail.

Language: there are various ways to address the mistakes made. You can create exercises from the mistakes or you can simply go through the major mistakes and explain the correct form.

Managerial Skills: as regards the meeting and presentation skills, the teacher should provide feedback on how to improve these skills. The feedback should include rapport building, body language, eye contact, etc

Written Communication: Having corrected the written work which resulted from the case study interaction, you can also look at such issues as the difference between spoken and written language and style switching. You will be also able to provide targeted feedback on the written documents ? visuals, agendas and minutes.

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Appendix

The Language of Meetings



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