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TEACHING BUSINESS ENGLISH AND CASE STUDIES

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Abstract: The present paper aims at discussing several advantages and disadvantages of teaching Business English by means of case studies. Moreover, it attempts to provide certain solutions in order to overcome the negatives outcomes that may come up. On the other hand, it stresses the importance and even the necessity of making use of this teaching method for Business English classes because it is beneficial for the development of language skills as well as for acquiring the behavioural patterns specific to today's business environment..

Keywords: case studies, Business English, language teaching, ESP, globalization.

Case studies-A brief introduction

When speaking about case studies, one refers to either simple pair role-play activities (short individual case studies), or group-based activities. Whereas in the first case, students are given a brief description of a situation and then they are required to act out the parts of people involved in the case, in the latter the students are provided with targeted content input to practise a specific skill, such as negotiating, interviewing, problem-solving or decision–making (see Castler & Palmer 1989: 9).

In his *Business Analysis for Marketing Managers*, Rogers makes a distinction between case studies and case histories and projects. According to his theory, case history is an event or a series of events set in an organizational setting with or without a related environment. Here, the events are described in some detail with the main and subsidiary points highlighted. The actions taken by subjects are under close scrutiny, the reactions, responses and effects on other subjects are related, and the events are taken to a conclusion or to a point that is irreversible. The case study also focuses on events seen within a framework/ an environment, but, as argued by Rogers, the problems are not always highlighted or even made clear, these emerge as the case material is subjected to analysis. On the contrary, a conclusion is not necessarily stated since it is usually possible to 'take over' operations at a suitable point in the role of an external adviser. While medical cases are typical of the first category (describing symptoms, suggesting possible causes, recommending a treatment, recording the prognosis), most business cases fall into the second class.

Thirdly, the case project is a series of diverse continuous events, set in an organizational framework and a well-defined environment. Those who study the case are led to a specific point in time and circumstance where they become a 'participant' in the case. They may be asked to assume the role of a person in the case, appointed to a particular vacancy, or to advise from the position of an external consultant. This role is made explicit and it is from that viewpoint that analysis, views, arguments and recommendations must be made; thus a behavioural aspect is introduced. For example, if placed in the position of a newly appointed middle manager, responses and suggestions are likely to be different from those of an external consultant (Rogers 1978:41).

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Due to its high degree of similarity with real business situations, where the stress falls more on the content and less on the linguistic practices, case method is highly used in the management and leadership seminars in famous European and American business schools. Similarly, such practices need to be paid more attention during Business English (BE) practical courses within the scope of ESP, with a particular focus on the communication skills.

As pointed out by Hutchinson and Waters, people can work and study simultaneously; besides, it is likely that the language used for immediate use in a study environment will be used later when the student takes up a job (1987: 16). In other words, the end purposes of both English for Academic Purposes and English for Specific/ Occupational Purposes overlap, since both ultimately aim at immersing the student in the job market. Therefore, case studies in BE aim to enhance the speaking/ listening skills within a business context.

As a content-based language teaching method, case study method is an approach to second language instruction that involves using the second language to learn and practice content , the latter representing a carrier for the language items to be learnt.

In the following sections, I am going to list the advantages and the disadvantages of the case study methodology from the point of both teachers and students.

Teachers' disadvantages

The reasons why many teachers are reluctant to use case studies in the classroom are:

1. The feeling that they might be overwhelmed by the content aspect of the case study. In some instances, teachers consider the presentation of the business content in BE teaching leads to misunderstanding in practical teaching by placing an improper emphasis on business acquisition.
   Solution: BE teacher should be to some extent familiar with the specialized area of business, although s/he is not a subject specialist. Collaboration between the language teacher and the subject teacher, and even team-teaching are more and more encouraged and assessed by some ESP practitioners.

2. The belief that it is difficult to deal with the business content implied by the case study because specialized content requires a large investment of both time and energy in the pre-teaching stage.
   Solution: teachers should be aware of the importance of case studies and they should allocate the necessary time and resources of their preparation. They might also consider external lecturers from the industry to develop and/or to contribute to a case study. Thus, new dimensions can be added to the learning activity which can lead to an enhanced teaching act (cf. Nadrag & Buzarna-Tihenea 2013: 134-139).

3. The conservative approach which sees teaching as the transmission of information gives some teachers the impression that the teaching act is not performed if they use case studies because learners do not get enough improvement in language skills to deal with business-related situations. They fear that students might have the tendency to use the simple patterns they are accustomed to instead of practicing more complex ones. Besides, others believe that students can't really be corrected because they should be allowed to speak without frequent interruptions.
   Solution: There are various ways to address the mistakes made. Exercises can be

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drafted from mistakes or a list can be made during the performance for the teacher to be able to simply go through and explain the correct forms at the end of the case study.

4. The difficulty of assessing both the content and the language coverage.
   Solution: There are various ways in which case study teaching can be assessed:
   a. Questionnaires
   b. Interviews
   c. Discussions
   d. Independent evaluators.

5. The lack of comfort with role shifting, from teacher to facilitator, which only means course designer, materials provider, adviser, or observer.
   Solution: It is advisable that, in this situation, the teacher should not interrupt the students. However, s/he plays an active role in noting the various reactions of the role-players, the quality of their responses, their body language, etc.

6. Finally, the unpredictability posed by case studies, where there is no specific frame and no definite outcome.

Teachers' advantages

As I hope to prove, the advantages of the case study methodology outrank the shortcomings and bring more challenges to BE teachers. Its benefits are:

1. Open-minded, reflective, critical and active learning is encouraged;
2. Applying the previous linguistic acquisition is allowed and the gap between theory and practice is bridged;
3. Involving the four language teaching skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing) at once within the business context;
4. Facilitating the use of multiple linguistic registers;
5. Placing a focus on the student, who can be better monitored, helped and guided;
6. Enhancing the teacher-student dynamics .

Learners' disadvantages

The reasons why some students are reluctant to taking part in case studies are:

1. They find it hard to cope with case studies basically because of their lack of trust in their BE skills.
   Solution: Teachers should familiarize the students with the main elements before the case. Precisely, they should provide information about the format, content, language input and documents characteristic to a business event: charts, books, web sites, etc.

2. They may find the case study boring and unexciting and, as a result, they are unwilling to pay much attention and effort.
   Solution: Teachers should develop case studies based on students' research interests and even request students to develop case studies based on their personal interests and linguistic knowledge.

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3. Some of them may not work efficiently enough in an environment they are not accustomed to. They might prefer a formal and time-constrained setting instead.
   Solution: Teachers should think about introducing both coursework and exam assessment on the case study content in the overall course. As a consequence, all students will be able to develop a range of skills.

4. Some rivalries between the members of the group are likely to prevent group working due to the different levels of input that some members may provide.
   Solution: Teachers should enable the group to set specific targets and should identify the roles of each individual.

Learners' advantages

A challenge for the teacher, this method can be viewed as pleasant adventure by the student, who can benefit from it as a practice and/or revision activity. The advantages one can think of are as follows:

1. Case studies have a rich content and can provide the learner with the potential to consolidate the already acquired knowledge and train specific language and managerial skills;
2. They provide a systematic way of looking at events, collecting information, analysing data, and reporting the results. What is more, case studies a suitable for both generating and testing hypotheses on appropriate language usage;
3. Nowadays, with the trend of a globalized job market (cf. Bâcă 2012: 130-136), many organizations and companies are now operating across national boundaries. Consequently, as future employees, students need to have cross-cultural understanding of many business situations as well as the necessary language skills;
4. Avoiding strict rules, the environment created by means of this methodology helps students develop their creativity;
5. As students carry out independent research outside the tutorial milieu, individual study skills are encouraged;
6. Case studies also enhance collaborative (peer-to peer) learning and team-working skills in the language learner;
7. Students may develop the management skills required by some leading roles;
8. As far as the presentation skills are concerned, BE case studies often require participants to present their work in various formats: oral presentations, reports, memos, minutes of a meeting, s.o.;
9. From the point of view of the listening skills, an important part of what students learn comes from listening to contracting analyses, opinions, perspectives offered by their colleagues;
10. As long as the topic is interesting and enjoyable, the students aspire to learn in a more relaxed atmosphere.

Conclusion

As argued in the present paper, although the main aim of the language teacher is not to teach content but rather to improve the students' communication skills in the L2 , case studies

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drafted and adapted to the needs of the BE class are important for the development of both linguistic and extra linguistic competences. Teaching by means of case studies is a process of permanent intellectual challenge along which the teachers can learn as much as their students do.

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