

## **Teaching Business English with Cases—An Application of Case Method in Business English Teaching<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** Globalization of the world economy renders a high demand for business talents with adequate intercultural communicative competence. As an important way of training such talents, business English teaching grows rapidly in past decades. However, the current Business English teaching lacks systematic teaching methods to train students' business skills and develop their intercultural communicative competence. This paper proposes that case method could be a rewarding teaching method in Business English teaching. Case method is feasible for teaching Business English as it is consistent with principles in linguistics and learning theory. The specific application of case method in Business English class is discussed from the perspective of case preparation, case discussion and case assessment. Potential challenges for teaching Business English with cases are analyzed from the angles of teachers and students. This paper finds that case method is still a relatively new method for BE teaching and its effective use calls for further positive and empirical studies.

**JEL Classifications:** A22, I20, F60

**Keywords:** Business English, Case method, Intercultural communicative competence, Motivation of students, Teaching method, Teacher's qualification

### **1. Introduction**

The rapid growth of the global village has promoted English to be the most internationally used lingua franca in global business and Business English teaching has grown into a huge industry around the world. As a branch of ESP, business English (BE) aims to improve students' language proficiency and business skills. Meanwhile, to prepare students for communicating internationally, BE teaching attaches great importance to the cultivation of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). In fact, awareness of the importance of one's own culture in relation to those of others has become a growing issue in the field of Business English (Mark Eliis & Christine Johnson, 2002). As a language course in essence, BE teaching tends to improve students' language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating in a certain business context and seems to lack systematic teaching methods to train students' business skills and enhance their ICC.

The case method was initially introduced in business education and is now a teaching approach widely adopted in business schools. It consists in presenting the students with a case, putting them in the role of a decision maker facing a problem (Hammond, 1976). The application of case method in BE teaching could be a rewarding attempt. In China, some BE teachers have already tried to use case method to motivate students to "learn by doing" (Wang & Yan, 2006; X.G. Ye, 2008).

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## **2. Case Method and of BE Teaching**

### **2.1 Case Method**

The case method is a teaching method which encourages students to discuss a case in a certain area to achieved specific teaching objectives. Case study is the most important feature of case method of teaching (W.L. Dou, 2004). In case-based BE teaching, a case is a document that imitates or simulates a real business situation which puts students in the role of a participant of the situation. The situation does not have an obvious solution. The case provides an adequate fact base to stimulate an educated conversation concerning possible outcomes. Each case has one central decision point, dilemma, or angle. Different with the traditional lecture-based teaching which puts the teacher in the central place of teaching and learning activities, case method highlights the importance of students' commitments and participation in the learning process. In a case method classroom, both the teacher and the students must be active in different ways. Each is dependent on the other to bring about teaching and learning. Teachers are generally experts, but they rarely deliver their expertise directly.

As the case method pushes students to grapple with exactly the kinds of decisions and dilemmas that business people confront every day, and to express their solutions in group discussion, it can develop students' business skills and communication skills that can be used in real life.

### **2.2 Applicability of Case Method in BE Teaching**

Case method can be seen as a derivative of communicative teaching as it highlights the development of students' competence of using a language via real language activities. Its application in BE teaching could be supported by linguistics and learning theories.

Case method takes a functional view of language. In case-based business English teaching, the cultivation of ICC is regarded as a vital objective of teaching and all teaching activities are arranged to achieve it. The function and style of business communication are included in the content of a case

In terms of learning principles, case method meets the requirements for teaching communicative competence. First, case study enables students to acquire ICC by using English in real business context, which complies with the principle of "learning by doing", i.e., to learn a language through real communication. The success of learning a language depends on the acquisition of feedbacks that could only be obtained in real communicative process. Case study could provide feedbacks, either positive or negative, not only to students but also to the teacher who can use these feedbacks to assess students' performance in intercultural business communication. Second, case method agrees with the task-based teaching principle which holds that the completion of a meaningful task with a language can promotes language learning. A case consists of tasks for students to complete and enables students to practice different language skills during the completion of a task. Third, the principle of meaningfulness advocates the importance of exposing students to meaningful and authentic use of language. With cases quoted from the real business world, case method gives students the opportunity of practicing Business English and business skills in a meaningful and authentic situation.

Case method is not confined to the study of language structure. Instead, it takes into consideration many factors that are closely related with language study such as the use of language, social function of language, social and cultural context of language use and so on. In case-based BE teaching, acquisition of ICC is taken as the ultimate objective of language teaching and students are encouraged to understand and experience the context of culture and situation. Case-based BE teaching stresses on the development of students' comprehensive competence of using English to solve problems in real cross-cultural business communication and aims to prepare students to work in a globalized business world successfully.

### 3. Application of Case Method in BE Teaching

Case-based BE teaching mainly follows the procedures of case preparation, case analysis and discussion, and case assessment.

#### 3.1 Case Preparation

The effective use of case method in developing students' ICC depends to a large extent on a teacher's preparation of the case. A teacher needs to determine what specific goals are hoped to accomplish while writing a case or revising a published case. While focusing on the general goal of assessing students' application of business knowledge and principles to complex real business world situations with cases, a teacher should pay attention to the development of students' interpersonal communication skills through encouraging students to work in groups on cases. A teacher should also know the directions the discussion might take and identify the handful of concepts that students should be relying on in the discussion.

#### 3.2 Case Analysis and Discussion

As a student-centered teaching method, the success of teaching BE with a case requires students' active involvement in case discussion. To motivate students to participate actively in case discussion, the teacher should first give students clear instructions on what their responsibilities are in discussing the case. To create a good class atmosphere to generate and sustain students' participation, the teacher should set some ground rules for participation. First, the teacher should stress that the case analysis is a group project and everyone should contribute some ideas to it. Second, the group must recognize the significance of cooperation in working on the case. Third, everyone should be required to actively work together on the analysis and guaranteed no criticism for raising naïve questions.

In the case analysis and discussion stage, the teacher's skill in asking good questions is very important for generating good discussion. The teacher can ask the kinds of questions that covers all the angles of the case. Open-ended questions are especially useful, because they demonstrate that there isn't a predetermined conclusion. It's also important to ask exploratory and relational questions—questions that probe into the reasoning behind conclusions, since some students may want to jump quickly to a solution without carefully examining the evidence or their assumptions.

A teacher in case discussion should behave as a facilitator, organizing the discussion by seeing if the class is satisfied that each of the action recommendations is discussed fully before moving on to the next. A teacher needs to listen carefully to students' responses, paraphrase when necessary, and give students sufficient time to reflect on questions or issues that are raised.

#### 3.3 Case Assessment

When summarizing a class discussion on a case, a teacher should focus not only on the content of the case, but also on the process of analysis and evaluation. A teacher can take charge at this point and offer an assessment of the case, or he can ask the students themselves to pull together the various strands of the discussion. If some issues weren't resolved fully, or if answers to questions seemed to demand more information, students can be assigned research tasks for the next class session.

What should be noted for using case method in BE teaching is that it's helpful to give students feedback on how a teacher thinks the discussion itself went, i.e., on how the teacher saw the group interact and progress. A teacher should be specific when talking about strategies that worked or didn't work, or commenting on group behavior that helped or hindered the discussion to help students improve their ability to understand future cases and participate in analyzing them.

## 4. Challenges for Implementing Case Method in BE Teaching

Application of case method in BE teaching is not an easy job. Challenges may come from both the teacher and students of Business English. The teacher's qualification is a major concern. The student-centered case method of teaching doesn't mean a teacher gets an easier job than giving a lecture. The preparation of a proper case which meets the teaching objective is time-consuming. The guidance of case discussion requires the teacher to be insightful of business issues and capable of leading the discussion to the right direction. Generally speaking, a good business English teacher is himself an expert on business and English and has personal experience of doing business and communicating inter-culturally. However, in reality, most business English teachers are originally majored in English and lack practical experience in the world of business or communication. Periodical teacher training on teaching methods and knowledge on business and intercultural business communication could be a feasible way to improve BE teachers' qualification.

Case method needs the teacher and the students to be interactive. However, how to motivate students to participate in the case-based BE teaching is really very challenging. In traditional lecture-based teaching, students are used to receiving knowledge passively. When a case is firstly introduced into the course, they may be interested in it at first, but soon keep silent again as they are expecting the "right" answer from the teacher.

## 5. Conclusion

Case method in business English teaching provides students with opportunities of practicing English in real-life business communication situations, which can foster students' critical thinking and help them develop ICC. However, case method is still a relatively new method for BE teaching and its effective use calls for further positive and empirical studies. It should be noted that case method is not the only effective method of teaching BE and the development of students' ICC should be a result of many combined teaching methods.

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