

Studying Business and Legal English through Case –Studies

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Abstract

Language teaching is not simply an exercise in training people in skills. It is intended to impart to them something useful and valid, which means that the skills have to be integrated, so that students can be helped to overcome their difficulties in communication. A lot of business and law courses came to studying business and legal English through case studies. Taking an active part in problem-solving and decision-making with all the pain and pleasure make students be involved in progressing from analysis of a problem to a successful solution. Discussing the problems, listening to each other and expressing ideas are the ways of exercising all four language skills using case studies in language teaching and examining whether or not they work effectively in the classroom.

Keywords: English language teaching; Methodology; Professional development; Case study; Skills; Linguistics; University education; Business and law; Linguistic problems; Learning language.



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1. Introduction

When we started teaching case studies in Kazan State University, the teaching materials for more advanced students were still biased towards theoretical aspects of business and law. Students were given special articles to read and special topics to learn by heart. Testing and evaluation were mainly in writing, which did not encourage them to develop their communicative abilities.

More recently, students at the university have become more and more aware of the importance of English to their professional careers. They have come themselves to feel the necessity of developing their professional skills, and so have their teachers, who now realise that the design of any curriculum has to be student-centred. It has to be determined primarily by the long-term needs of the students. Its goal has to be professional competence. Students graduating from the university have to be ready to go on to the next stage in their lives, join the work force and function effectively in English. Since they are going to be lawyers, managers, business people, executives and so on, they will need to use English effectively in their business transactions. They must absorb information quickly, read selectively, and make decisions under pressure.

Students must have a good command of English if they are going to be taking part in arbitration, international business, attending meetings, or contacting foreigners in any other ways. To be professional, they have to be proficient in all four skills, including speaking and writing. Case studies give a good opportunity to practise all four skills in a realistic situation.

Using English in a non-English speaking country is always artificial to some extent. So a situation has to be created in which it is natural to use the language. The students must have realistic business contexts in which to develop their English language skills and business communication abilities.

Because of time constraints in completing the syllabus, the case has to be selected carefully. The most successful case studies are those that require creativity, in which the students can express their own ideas, and will often have to argue fiercely with each other in the process.

An appropriate case study relevant to the students and their course, will involve a wide range of activities. The students are provided with the necessary background reading materials, and then have to solve various tasks that motivate them. This requires of them a repertoire of reading skills from scanning to intensive critical reading. But the reading is not a passive activity. The students have to understand the case, analyse and interpret the information and data, identify the key points, and define the problem.

2. Methods

The work proceeds in three main stages. In the preparatory stage, they must absorb information selectively and quickly, whereas in the input stage, students must approach the problem from various angles, becoming more and more familiar with the case. The various tasks they are given must keep them busy all the time. The more varied and comprehensive the tasks, the more interesting they will find them.

Students will be invited to predict the content from headings, study key vocabulary, complete SWOT analyses, and so on. SWOT means strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats; a system for examining, the way a company is run or the way someone works to see what the good and bad points are [Mayor \(2009\)](#).

The reading texts will often be accompanied by audio materials which help them understand the case more thoroughly. The case study provides the suspension of disbelief, the framework in which students are motivated to listen for information, feel the need to take notes and collect new information, and practise vocabulary in context, in a number of different ways. Tasks will include matching words from the texts to their definitions or synonyms, deducing the meaning of words from their context, finding word partnerships, and performing world-building exercises. Thereby they come to know more and more about the case, become aware of the meaning of the words they encounter, have chances to apply them in practice, and increase their confidence as speakers and as communicators. It is mentioned in details in different articles (Gubaidullina *et al.*, 2015; Ilyasova *et al.*, 2016).

Additional input can be given, such as reviewing the language of meetings, negotiations and presentations. In the processing stage, the development of the case can itself propose a variety of tasks. Here the students can discuss the options, make suggestions, and again present and defend their points of view, working in pairs or teams. Such collaborative work develops their communicative abilities while improving their special vocabulary developing their inter-personal skills, and encouraging interaction and communication.

So long as the case is relevant and interesting to the students, it will help to create them a virtual reality in which the problems occurring have many different solutions, none of which is ideal (for instance, a case of choosing the right person for a job) (Odrakiewicz, 2010; Widdowson *et al.*, 2010).

3. Results and Discussions

Whereas academic problems are neatly laid out, real-world problems, and simulations of them in a case study, are disordered and not properly defined. Students must develop sound arguments, use persuasive language and spontaneously engage in communication. The prime objective is for them to perform realistic communication activities, without having to worry about linguistic problems. As Hutchinson said, "Learning a language is not just a matter of linguistic knowledge" (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). But this certainly does not mean neglecting grammar entirely, just that the proportion must be different, with the emphasis on tasks rather than grammar. It is proved in David Cotton's case study books that grammatical problems can be built into the teaching. They are mainly subservient to the communication. This makes English become operational: the learners can successfully function in English (Odrakiewicz, 2010).

Almost everybody is involved in the development of the case, which means there are no passive participants. The complexity of the tasks brings out the creativity in the students. In a case study they can focus on the main business activities, such as meeting, negotiations and presentations. To take a specific example, there are a great many tasks suggested in David Cotton's book for the case "Make or Break". Students have to make a presentation, introducing a new product with convincing arguments, in order to persuade the bank to lend their companies money. This brings an everyday situation in a company's life naturally into the classroom (Odrakiewicz, 2010).

Using another case, students acted out a meeting, and although they received role cards to which they had to stick, they managed to express their own ideas within the role description provided. The students had to conduct a board meeting, during which they had to express their views on the company's future. Various options were discussed. Should they compete with their rivals? Should they merge with them? Or should they find other ways in which to make their company operate efficiently?

From the language point of view, they completed their tasks successfully, but the audience immediately realised that they were pre-work learners who did not yet know much about what goes on at a real business meeting. This raises the question as to whether case studies are more appropriate for students with work experience than for pre-work students.

Obviously students with practical experience will have a deeper insight into the situation than university students. But the purpose behind case studies at university level is to provide students with linguistic instruments they can use in their future lives (and if need be the incidental business knowledge required to interpret them). If in addition they get the necessary business training, they will "play" their instruments without difficulty when the time comes.

Having discussed the strengths and weaknesses of performance, it is important to show students a model meeting (Salmon, 2004). Here ten main sections deal with the principal features of meetings, such as getting started, presenting information, reacting, directing, and taking decisions. The "product development group" show first of all how not to do it, following this up with an improved version. The video on the one hand is good fun, and on the other proves to be very effective in improving students' knowledge of a cardinal business situation and the body of English associated, with it.

Participating in a meeting is usually a successful activity with university groups. Students not only impersonate their roles, but identify with them. They express their own ideas, using the language they know, combining it with their personal experience. "Tasks and activities have to oblige the learners to think, to use their cognitive capacities and their knowledge of the world to make sense of the flow of new information", as Hutchinson writes (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987).

4. Summary

All four language skills are indeed brought to bear. Although in case studies most activities target the improvement of communication skills, students obviously have to gain competence in business writing as well. Writing tasks are easily added as follow-up activities, and there are a wide variety of them: reports, memos, advertisements and so on. These writing tasks turn out to be as closely related to the case as the verbal ones. In just

the same way, the students can put together the selected information and add their own ideas. Writing memos prompts suggestions on how to vary language according to whom it is being sent, which helps to make students aware of the differences in style required when writing to a superior or a subordinate.

Students can be invited to write various reports. Taking likely situations arising in a company and deciding on the action to be taken, they can then write a full report recommending this action. For instance, a report may be written describing the events of an accident and making recommendations about the prevention of similar accidents. They may be asked to draw inferences from a set of data and write a full report on the data. After board-meeting simulations, they can write the minutes.

When studying advertisements, students will have to mount an advertising campaign of their own, writing the copy themselves. Here students prove to be quite imaginative. Some of them are going to specialise in marketing. They come up with some brilliant and amusing ideas when writing advertisements. Humour, after all, is as indispensable in the teaching and learning process as elsewhere in life, particularly in creating a friendly atmosphere that makes the learning process less painful.

Role play and simulation are integral to the case studies. Completing the tasks normally involves the students in working together, relying on each other, exchanging their ideas and listening to other opinions. In a word they have to be tolerant. This team work also helps them to overcome their uneasiness about speaking a foreign language. What Moskowitz calls the humanistic approach takes a "concern for personal development, self-acceptance as its central focus, and materials in the humanistic tradition, or those influenced by it, can promote friendship, good feeling, and co-operation, while providing good language practice" (Oxford and Shearin, 1994).

A frequent problem in groups is that not all members participate equally in the discussions. Sometimes dominant members can take over completely, leaving shy students unable to get a word in edgeways. However, if the tasks are relevant and the aims of the activities are clear, students will be encouraged to think in terms of group aims and strategies. Clearly defined tasks help to develop the ability to compromise, learn, listen and create a positive atmosphere.

The teaching of case studies is a teaching-learning process. When setting up the case, the teacher has to know what tasks he or she wants the students to perform, and the students have to be quite clear about what is expected of them. So tasks and activities have to be arranged in a logical sequence. The teacher works as an observer, monitoring students and helping them if need be.

Students are very good at interpreting data and explaining graphs and charts, which can sometimes be a great help to their teachers. Such co-operation between the teacher and the students helps to eliminate the usual hierarchy, which can be a barrier to expression. On the one hand the teacher retains a central position, correcting mistakes in language, and on the other relies on the students' creativity and subject knowledge.

5. Conclusions

The choice of a case can be flexible, according to the interests and needs of the learners. Teachers can develop their own case studies, collecting suitable sets of materials out of newspaper articles, recordings from television and other business documents such as annual reports product brochures, etc. After the material has been gathered, it can be arranged to form a logical sequence of events. Though the pattern of a ready made case study may be followed, it is tailor made for the class.

This potential for controversy means that the case can be amply explored through discussion of the options (who wants to buy the company), decision-making (who to sell the company to) and the formulation of action plans. Other authentic materials like extracts from company annual reports, product brochures and publicity materials may suggest other communicative tasks such as a presentation of a company or a new product.

The final aspects of case studies to be considered are the processes of evaluation and feedback. These again are reciprocal. While the teacher can make sure that each student is required to perform certain communication tasks, monitor their performance, and provide corrective feedback when the task is completed, the students can give feedback on the case selected, discussing whether it has been interesting and realistic, whether they could identify with the company and its problems, and last but not least to what extent the case coincided with their needs and interests. Detailed information is presented in different works (Fakhrutdinova *et al.*, 2015).

To sum up, it should be underlined case studies are very useful and effective in teaching business and legal English. Although it is one out of many ways of teaching the language of different skills, and the right mix of these has to be found. Certainly case studies must rate highly for the way they motivate the students, and for the excitement generated by the game, in which everyone, teachers and students alike, is a winner.

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