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ABSTRACT

A course in English for business administration using the case study method is described. The course is designed for graduate students and makes use of a common technique for analyzing and solving business problems. The approach is aimed at improving both oral and writing skills in English through small group discussion and written analysis. A central part of the course is the practice of videotaping discussions for feedback to improve fluency. The selection of case types for effective learning is discussed. It is proposed that the approach could be adapted easily for teaching academic or general English as a second language. (MSE)

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RECEPTIVE/PRODUCTIVE SKILL DEVELOPMENT USING  
CASE STUDIES AND A VIDEO METHOD

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The case study method is an integral part of business programs in the United States and Great Britain. In this method, students analyze cases of actual business situations and gain hands-on experience discussing complex business issues in a relatively risk-free environment.

Recognizing the importance of case studies in business programs and their potential usefulness as language learning tools, ESP and EAP instructors have begun to include cases in their courses, using them primarily to help improve composition skills through written analyses. However, this type of training, while of great benefit, does not accurately reflect the linguistic demands of MBA programs. In addition to written analyses of cases, MBA professors require active participation in class and small group discussions. Through these discussions, MBA students examine the relationship between their personal values and beliefs and business issues and practice effective oral expression, a skill crucial for successful business. This oral skill requirement, which often determines up to 25% of a student's course grade, should not be overlooked in ESP courses.

In this paper, I describe the design of an ESP case study course aimed at improving both written and oral skills. A central part of the course is a video method which helps to develop fluency in small-group discussions. Although this course was originally designed for students interested in business, the materials and particularly the video-based technique can be easily adapted for EAP or general ESL courses as well.



### Selection of Cases

There are case studies from many business areas to choose, for example: management, marketing, consumer behavior, and accounting. Thus, it is important to consider several points when selecting cases. First, what area or areas of business are most relevant for the students in the course? Depending upon student interest, cases from several areas can be used; for example, those in management and marketing seem to be particularly popular with students and are not as heavily laden with numbers as are cases in accounting.

A second consideration of great importance to ESP instructors without an extensive business background is the availability of teacher notes. Most case books come with accompanying teacher manuals, and those that do not may include a few focus questions at the end of each case to serve as a guide.

Another factor to consider when choosing cases is the type of case as there are 3 major types. One is a case study of a situation in which the management is facing a problem when no decision has yet been made and the student is asked to suggest a solution. The second type describes an action that has already been taken, requiring an evaluation on the part of the reader. The third requires general appraisal, in which students are asked to analyze the structure of an organization to determine whether everything is proceeding as it should. Cases of the first type, in which students are asked to state the problem and consider alternate courses of action, are particularly effective in stimulating discussion as students try to agree upon the most viable alternatives.

Another consideration in choosing cases is whether they deal with national or international issues. Either type may be of great interest to students. The book, Consumer Behavior, includes some stimulating domestic cases, including "Which Coke is it?", a case which deals with Coca-Cola's marketing blunder (or was it coup?) of the century. Several of the other texts (Appendix A) delve into international issues. The book International Marketing Management, for example, includes the Connecticut Corporation case which deals with an American company's intercultural marketing dilemma as to whether to pull out of the vodka market in Japan when faced with stiff domestic competition or to go after it "tooth and nail."

Another, and probably the most important, consideration when selecting cases for ESL students is length, that is, the shorter the better. Many ESP instructors use cases primarily from Harvard Business School since they are well known. In general, however, Harvard cases tend to be long, averaging around 20 pages. Many cases of a more reasonable length for ESL students (one to eight pages) are available from other sources (Appendix A).

### The Business School Approach

Having selected appropriate cases, the ESP instructor must then decide whether to adapt the cases, for example, by shortening or rewriting them, or to leave them untouched. The latter approach seems more appropriate with upper-level ESP students soon to be entering undergraduate or graduate business programs. Such students need exposure to authentic language and procedures common in business schools. To take a "language teaching approach" and simplify

the cases at this point would be somewhat misleading and certainly not as appealing to advanced students desiring "real" course content.

In business schools, as in "real-life" business, students receive a mass of information that they must sift through, deciding for themselves which points are relevant or irrelevant. Students are asked to scrutinize the facts and decide for themselves what the various options are. There is little, if any, guidance since it is the ability to organize and analyze that the business programs are trying to teach. This experience will give students the skills to assume responsible positions in the business world, where the person with the analytical mind is highly valued.

Business professors do, however, often provide their students with a few guidelines for reading and analyzing cases. These are of great help to international students who may be unaccustomed to the less than straightforward manner in which case studies present information.

To approach a case, the first suggestion business professors offer is to look at the title, headings, graphs, and illustrations to determine the topic and general organization of the case, common pre-reading activities. Then, students are directed to read the case through once quickly, underlining key words and ideas. After that, they can go back and read the case more thoroughly, mastering facts and details, and only then write out their individual, in-depth analysis of the case. Before coming to class, students are encouraged to discuss their interpretation with several other students and make revisions if necessary. This outside-of-class, small-group discussion is

important preparation for presenting their opinions in an in-class discussion of the case.

The actual analysis of the case involves a series of steps. By considering each of these steps separately, one is guided through the analysis process from identifying the problem to envisioning viable solutions. Although there seems to be some disagreement on the exact number of steps involved, the content of the basic analysis process is fairly consistent among all sources.

The first step is to state the problem(s). Determining the critical issue raised in the case usually requires going beneath the surface to separate symptoms from the actual problem. For example, it is not accurate to state that low sales volume is the problem in a case when low sales volume is only a symptom of an underlying problem which may be poor supervision by sales managers, an inefficient distribution network, a poor incentive program, or something else. Having identified the problem, the next step in analysis is to consider its causes and then to give alternate solutions or courses of action, weighing the pros and cons of each. Finally, it is necessary to select one solution and be prepared to support it. It should be noted that sometimes the best course of action in a case is the "zero option," to do nothing.

An important point to discuss with students preparing to work with case studies in business courses is that case studies have no "right answer." They are intended to serve as the basis for class discussion in MBA (as well as ESP) classes rather than to demonstrate either effective or ineffective handling of a business situation. A statement to that effect is often written into each case to serve as a reminder.



Many international students have problems dealing with this kind of ambiguity, the absence of one right answer (Candlin, et al, 1982). Students may have encountered case studies in business training in their native countries; however, the approach used in their courses was probably different. It is likely that they were asked to read the case carefully and then come up with the right solution to the problem, usually with help from their instructor. As a result, they may find the common classroom practice in the United States, which emphasizes discussion and debate, unsettling and even frustrating.

Cases are deliberately designed to be open-ended. They stop without recommending a solution and ask the analyst to decide what to do next. A number of alternate courses of action will usually present themselves, and several of these may be equally viable. As a result, there will be differences of opinion about what the "best" course of action is. To cope with this, students must be encouraged to be open-minded and prepared to defend their chosen course of action based on their analysis of the material.

### Supplementary ESP Materials

In addition to unadapted cases and guidelines for helping students read and analyze them, there are other supplementary materials in business and language learning that can be included. Readings on relevant business theories, such as management or marketing, can be helpful to both ESP teachers and students in formulating possible solutions to a problem. In addition, with less advanced students, it is advisable to include a few questions to focus attention on key facts in the case. Charles (1984) suggests using supplementary ELT materials to reinforce structural or lexical items crucial to a particular case. In line



with Edge and Samuda's (1981) "methodials" (in which method and materials are joined), Charles recommends that the teacher anticipate what language points will be needed in analysis of a case and then insert them at the crucial point when students have a "need to mean" (Edge and Samuda, 1981). For example, when students are sampling and then comparing the tastes of "Coke Classic" and "New Coke," with that of "Pepsi," the teacher can be prepared to provide students with the necessary comparative and superlative forms ("It tastes the same as Pepsi to me!"). In addition, Charles points out that the teacher should be ready to supplement students' "ordinary" language with more colorful, idiomatic language to express their ideas (Student: "They gave him money so he would not say anything." Teacher: "Right! They wanted to have him on the hook.").

In addition to supplementary materials that focus on improving linguistic accuracy, that is, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, materials that develop linguistic fluency can be used in a case study course to help students meet the oral challenge of their business classes.

### Developing Linguistic Fluency

Murphy (1986) defines linguistic fluency as the "use of language" and accuracy as "knowledge of the language." According to Murphy, "errors of fluency" result from mistakes in the sociopragmatics of group discussion. These errors are due to the absence of feedback or the inappropriate use of feedback to maintain successful communication. Errors of fluency are being made, for example, if some people in a group never get a turn to speak, or if people are looking down at their papers instead of at the speaker to avoid having to speak next, or if silence falls over the group and no one knows how to proceed. These

errors of fluency are due to problems with turn-taking and the absence of feedback to tell the speaker if her/his message is getting across.

If learners are to communicate successfully in a language other than their own, they must reduce their errors of fluency. To do this, they need to know how to use feedback appropriately. I have found that the use of a video method can guide students to appreciate the importance of feedback in communication and to learn how to use it effectively.

### The Video Method

One very helpful tool in teaching the use of feedback is video recording and playback. Video is the ideal medium to capture the sociopragmatic aspects of group discussion. As Kennedy (1983) suggests, video can play a key role in helping international students participate in university seminars. As students' problems are often both verbal and nonverbal, it can be immensely valuable to study and discuss videotaped examples of successful and unsuccessful communication. By viewing a group of people engaged in discussion, such as a group of MBA candidates, ESL students can be guided to practice skills that are necessary and expected in small-group discussions. These ESL students can then be videotaped and see themselves in action. This use of video to illustrate strengths and weaknesses in communication is much more effective in improving students' discussion skills than the instructor patrolling the classroom to encourage everyone to speak up.

By videotaping native and non-native MBA students, I have developed the following set of guidelines for producing video materials that encourage the

appropriate use of feedback in small-group discussion in order to avoid errors of fluency. As previously mentioned, this video-based method, although originally designed for students interested in business, could be equally well applied in EAP or general ESL courses as well.

The first step is to videotape a small group of people (preferably native and non-native speakers) engaged in discussion of a case study. When videotaping there are a few points to remember: a) Restrict the group to four or five people. More than five people tend not to participate equally in a discussion, and a large group will not fit into the picture with faces clearly visible if you are using a regular camera lens. If possible, use a wide angle lens even with just four or five people. b) Be certain to use separate rooms if there is more than one discussion group because the sound carried between groups will be recorded. c) Depending upon the sensitivity of the microphone on the camera, an external microphone might be advisable to record voices clearly. d) For later reference or research, have a sign-in sheet for your participants including name, native country, and amount of time they have lived in the U.S.

The second step before showing the model tape to the students is to note the general types of feedback, both verbal and nonverbal, used to maintain fluent communication in the group discussion. Common feedback gambits include those for expressing understanding/not understanding (which are particularly important for ESL students) and agreement/disagreement. In addition, there are many expressions to show indecision and to "buy time," such as "Well, let me think," or "That's a good question," as well as expressions to introduce one's point of view. Beedham (mimeo.) gives a quite thorough analysis of the language of case studies in terms of grammatical points and communicative functions.

When selecting segments to show to ESL students, remember to keep them short with the focus usually on only one type of feedback. Several segments that illustrate the use of a specific type of feedback can even be combined into a new tape using film editing equipment to facilitate moving from one segment to the next. Having selected the segments, exercises can then be developed to draw students' attention to crucial points, for example, descriptive exercises to focus on nonverbal language or cloze exercises to elicit particular feedback gambits.

In the third step, students view the segments from the model tape of MBA students. Class discussion focuses on the specific type of feedback, such as expressing agreement or disagreement. After noting the particular gambit(s) used in the segment, students are encouraged to generate alternatives that would also have been appropriate in that specific use context.

By now you have established the importance of feedback in maintaining successful communication and have provided students with a repertoire of feedback gambits and their appropriate use contexts by analyzing a series of model segments. The next step, then, is to monitor the students' use of feedback in their own group discussion. Video is especially well-suited for this purpose. With video, it is not necessary to interrupt an activity to correct errors of fluency, which would serve just to distract students from their purpose of analyzing the case. Rather, students can view the tape later either privately with the instructor or together as a group to determine whether a healthy give and take existed or whether a breakdown in communication had occurred, and if so, why? Seeing themselves on tape graphically illustrates the students' strong and weak points in communication and is much more effective than the

instructor's interrupting the discussion to make corrections. Learners can assess their own language performance and set their own goals for the term. Finally, subsequent student discussions can be taped and analyzed to determine whether students' skills at maintaining a fluent discussion have improved.

Conclusion

Case studies present exceptional difficulties for international business students in terms of receptive and productive skill requirements. Students are not only required to read a lengthy text overflowing with new vocabulary and idioms and to prepare a written analysis, but they are also required to engage in an often intense debate of the case with other students, most of whom will probably be native speakers. To do this effectively, students must be adept at using feedback appropriately in discussions; they must be able to communicate with few "errors of fluency." Language instructors can help them achieve this linguistic fluency as well as accuracy. This type of skill development can be facilitated by use of the video method.

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APPENDIX ACase Sources

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