# Implementing Case Studies in Language Teacher Education and Professional Development

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A case study is a method of teaching that is used in a variety of disciplines. While specific definitions may vary, in general a case is a description of an actual or hypothetical yet realistic/real-world situation in which a person or persons face a problem or challenge. The following definition of a case is provided by Shulman (1999): "Cases are usually accounts of practical or strategic dilemmas that confront a teacher. To be valuable to use as a case, however, the narrative should be representative of a class or type of dilemma, problem, or quandary that arises with some frequency in teaching situations" (p. 92).

In teacher education, the case study method is a motivating, student-centered approach in which theoretical models and concepts are illustrated through their application to practical situations. Engagement in case studies promotes active involvement, participation, and critical thinking among participants. Case studies "can be used in any discipline when instructors want students to explore how what they have learned applies to real world situations…[and] require students to answer an open-ended question or develop a solution to an open-ended problem with multiple potential solutions" ("Using Case Studies to Teach," 2013). In the case method, participants are exposed to the breadth and depth of the content being studied. In short, students learn by doing, and they develop their ability to engage in "teacher theorizing" (Prabhu, 1992)  and "robust reasoning" (Johnson, 1999). Heitzmann (2008) stated that "any

robust definition of a teaching case must include a scenario delineating a problem that requires an interactive response by the learner" (p. 523).

Case studies are often traditionally thought of as being used in medical, legal, and business training. Physicians have long been trained by the case method, as medical school students are presented with the particulars of a patient's medical problem and are tasked with providing a diagnosis and course of treatment. In the legal field, Stanford Law School, for instance, uses case studies that "place students in the roles of lawyers and policy makers and teach fundamental lawyering skills such as investigating facts, counseling, and resolving ethical dilemmas" (Stanford Law School Case Studies Collection, 2012). In business schools, case studies have been used to teach business ethics, management, marketing, consumer behavior, sales, organizational behavior, entrepreneurship, and any number of other topic areas (Smith, 2010).

In short, case studies can be and are utilized in any subject area, including civil engineering (Newson & Delatte, 2011), accounting (Doran, Healy, McCutcheon, & O'Callaghan, 2011) and physical education (Richards, Hemphill, Templin, & Eubank, 2012). In fact, prospective applicants to these types of professional training schools might use case studies as one method of preparing for the admissions process and to improve their chances of acceptance into their desired program ("Case Studies," 2013).

## Approaches to Teacher Education

Language teacher education in the past several decades has incorporated many of the approaches and practices of general teacher education (Freeman & Richards, 1993; Clarke, 1994; Crandall, 2000; Woods, 1996). A current approach to teacher education includes the notion of teacher reflection, the incorporation of personal experience, teacher cognition, problem-posing, and teacher professional development (see, for example, (Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Golombek, 1998; Schleppegrell, 1997; Richards & Farrell, 2005). Crandall (2000) states that there has been a shift in language teacher education, which is evident in four essential areas: there is an emphasis on constructivist, process-oriented approaches; a focus on linking theory with the realities of classroom teaching; inclusion of teachers' prior learning and experience; and a focus on teacher learning as including self-directed and collaborative components. In a similar way, McNamara (2008) posits a view of language teaching and learning which involves individuals who are in interaction with others, and in which learning and teaching occur within institutional constraints. As Tsui (2003) states, "Teachers' knowledge must be understood in terms of the way they respond to their contexts of work, and this in turn shapes the contexts in which their knowledge is developed" (p. 2). The elements of teacher education outlined here can be realized in the use of the case method.

> *Engagement in case studies promotes active involvement, participation, and critical thinking among participants.*

## Case Method in Teacher Education

As the case approach has become an important component of teacher education programs, there has been an increase in the availability of teacher training materials which present information about and guidelines on how to use cases in education ("Using Case Studies to Teach," 2013). The use of case studies in TESOL has been less extensively used than in other educational and professional fields (Bailey, 2006). Nonetheless, the literature shows that the case method is increasingly incorporated in TESOL teacher education. Crandall (2000) states that "Teaching case studies and stories (like those used in the medical, legal, or business education) provide a means of bridging theory and practice and demonstrating the complexity of teaching as a profession. They provide contextualized portraits of the many factors which influence teacher decision making and behavior in the classroom" (p. 41).

Johnson (1996) advocated that in teacher education a transition from a traditional transmission-based approach to a constructivist approach can be achieved through a case-based method. This approach provides "rich descriptions of the complexities of teachers' work by revealing the complex variables that are considered as teachers sort out, make sense of, and justify the use of particular actions" (p. 767). Ellis (2010) suggested that teachers, both pre- and in-service, can connect theory and practice through "narrative discourse that arguably corresponds more closely to how teachers make sense of their work….through carefully selected case studies of classroom learners and of instructional interventions in language learning" (p. 187).

Case studies have also been incorporated in TESOL teacher education training materials (Roberts, 1997; Plaister, 1993). The TESOL international organization has a series of books in its *Case Studies in TESOL Practice*, each highlighting a different theme, which present the accounts of practitioners,

with the aim being that readers of such cases may reflect on and come to deeper understandings of the issues that they face in their own teaching context (for a review of the series, see Stoynoff, 2004).

Bailey (2006) used the case approach in her book on language teaching supervision, in which current and future supervisors can read about and engage in activities related to commonplace issues such as teacher observation and evaluation, autonomy and authority, and supervisory discourse.

## The Case Method in Professional Development

The benefits of the case method apply not only to pre-service teacher training, but they also can be used to promote professional development among experienced teachers. Time on the job in and of itself  may not be sufficient to develop and maintain pedagogical skills. Therefore, experienced educators can further their professional competencies through engagement in activities which allow them to bridge the theory-practice divide. The case method allows teachers to interact with theoretical principles by drawing upon their own and others' experiential and practical knowledge in addressing real-world problems. Teachers are able to view a particular case "as a member of a class of events and to call attention to its value" (Shulman, 1992, p. 21). As Bailey (2006) states, "These apparently imaginary situations provide us with safe contexts for thinking out alternative solutions to the problems raised" (p. 25).

The issue then becomes, in what way can the case study approach be applied with in-service teachers?  One method is through the implementation of a teacher study group (TSG). A teacher study group is a form of workplace learning, a collaborative effort designed to enhance teaching practice. Such

collaboration enables teachers to grow professionally by exploring their personal belief system, understanding how those beliefs are realized within their particular teaching context, and articulating their experiences. When teachers come together in faculty meetings, staff development days, or other collaborative settings, they may employ case study topics, which draw upon the practical matters faced by instructors in their classrooms and institutions. They may also go beyond the technical aspects of teaching and delve into deeper, more philosophical issues, such as the nature of teacher learning and the personal values and beliefs inherent in the craft of teaching.

## Benefits of Utilizing the Case Method

As the subject of an empirical research study, the case-based approach was shown to improve college students' ability to solve problems such as those that arise in dealing with classroom management issues (Choi & Lee, 2009).

Through their own use of the case approach, the authors have found that participants are able to improve their skills in the following areas:

- Critical thinking
- Oral communication (speaking and listening)
- Writing skills
- Interpersonal skills
- Resolving disagreement and consensus building
- Qualitative analysis
- Problem identification, problem posing, problem solving
- Evaluating criteria
- Identifying, evaluating and selecting among alternatives
- Decision-making
- Formulating, articulating, and imple-

menting a plan of action
- Ability to see complexity of real-world events and the impact of variable and unanticipated factors
- Ability to understand the perspective of others

## How to Use Case Studies

Case studies may be easier to implement with relatively small numbers (15 participants). While large numbers of participants may present additional challenges (e.g., loss of flexibility, decreased individual participation), research presents evidence that the approach is still workable and can be effective even with larger groups (Doran et al., 2011).

As mentioned above, case studies can be found in commercially published sources (Roberts, 1997; Plaister, 1993; Bailey, 2006). However, case studies which are written by the teacher educator or teacher study group facilitator for a particular group of participants have the benefit of being tailored to their specific needs and being directly aligned to course content or institutional/ programmatic context.

The following sections provide information designed to assist the reader in creating and implementing the case approach in his or her own teacher training or professional development context.

## Guidelines for Writing Case Studies

The process of writing a case study begins with a consideration of the educational or professional development objectives. First, determine what theories, constructs, and content you want the participants to learn through the case. The goal is for the case to highlight (rather than simply present) concepts, theories

and methodologies which participants can draw upon in addressing the issue.

One approach is to write cases based on teacher training course content, material from a TESOL course textbook, or other TESOL-related readings. As an example, the authors have used theory and method course textbooks (Brown H. D., 2007a; Brown H. D., 2007b) as the stimulus for the writing of cases. The content of these textbooks give a sense of the range of issues that are suitable for the development of case studies.

- First Language Acquisition
- Age and Acquisition
- Learning Styles and Strategies
- Personality Factors
- Communicative Competence
- Intrinsic Motivation in the Classroom
- Teaching Across Age Levels
- Teaching Across Proficiency Levels
- Sociocultural, Political, and Institutional Contexts
- Lesson Planning
- Technology in the Classroom
- Initiating and Sustaining Interaction in the Classroom
- Classroom-Based Assessment

Personal experience with pedagogical content and other professional issues are also ideal catalysts for or foundations of case studies. Examples include:

- Classroom management
- Student resistance to pedagogical change
- Administrative duties
- Implementing new curriculum
- Textbook adaptation
- Culture shock among students
- Teacher "successes" and "failures"

After the topic is selected, it is necessary to write a case that is sufficiently rich in context, details, personalities and culture in

order to promote discussion. The presentation of the case should be in a narrative, story-telling format, which provides sufficient background information about the  people and actions involved in the problem situation. In this way, participants are able to identify with the decision-maker's situation. In addition, the case must be written so that it is sufficiently challenging and interesting. The events should be authentic, realistic, and relevant to the particular group of participants who will be using the case. The case must also contain enough "urgency" and dynamic tension in order to produce competing views among the participants. The issues ("problems") presented in the case should be complex and multidimensional and open to reasoned interpretations and tradeoffs among competing alternatives (Farhoomand, 2004). A sample case study is provided in Appendix 1.

## Classroom delivery of case studies

Case study method allows flexibility in how the instructor or facilitator chooses to structure its implementation. One approach is as follows:  the case and any accompanying materials may be given to the participants prior to the session in which the case will be discussed so that they can become familiar with its particulars and prepare for group/class discussion and activities. In the class or professional development session, the instructor/facilitator may guide discussion of the topic, theory, or issue  before transitioning to group work on the case. Groups then discuss the case, presenting their opinions, clarifying the issues, proposing solutions, reaching opinions, or whatever the particular task calls for.

Afterward, the group as a whole may engage in discussion, group presentation, or other type of debriefing task. A written product may also be incorporated, either in the form of a worksheet  to be completed in the class or session, or in other instances a case analysis report or case summary can be written outside of the original meeting for homework or later discussion.

When pre- or in-service teacher participants are sufficiently familiar with the case study approach and have engaged in the experience several times, they can try their hand at writing their own cases to share with their classmates or colleagues.

## Assessing participants' work with case studies

Case studies, which are incorporated as part of a professional development program, may not require an assessment component. In teacher education contexts, however, assessment may be desired. Because a case study approach involves group and class collaboration and discussion, assessing participation tends to be subjective. However, there are several techniques that can be used to provide an objective evaluation (i.e., scores) to case study work. Rubrics can be utilized for this purpose. It may be sufficient to provide holistic ratings such as "very good," "good," "fair," and "poor" to capture the instructor's subjective assessment. In other situations, however, a detailed rubric against which specific criteria are assessed might include categories such as depth and breadth of analysis, individual engagement, collaborative effort, and peer interaction. Guidelines for the creation and use of rubrics, as well as rubric templates, can be found at sites such as www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/rubrics.htm.

In-class and out-of-class assignments, which can be graded, may also be utilized. During class time when the case is being discussed, work sheets, jigsaw tasks, mini presentations, and other tasks which are

implemented in the case analysis process can be completed for a grade if desired (see Appendix 2). Participants can be required to complete a comprehension check, write a response paper, or complete another task that is related to content/readings upon which the case is based.

For homework or follow-up work, tasks which require the participants to summarize the case, synthesize two or more cases, and apply the case principles to their own real-life experiences provide additional, in-depth exploration of the case material. In a classroom situation, instructors may choose to incorporate case studies in formal exams, allowing students to apply the skills in which they have been trained and which they have practiced in class activities.

## Conclusion

Case studies offer a pedagogically sound approach to promoting the acquisition of course content among pre-service teachers and to fostering the professional development of in-service teachers. They are an ideal vehicle by which to engage participants in applying critical thinking skills to the identification and evaluation of problems and issues which teachers face every day in their classrooms and schools, and allow them to collaborate in articulating responses to these problems. Ultimately, engagement in the case method allows educators to develop a deeper understanding of their own beliefs, values, and conceptions of their teaching in relation to the particulars of the context in which they work.

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## Appendix A: Sample Case Study

### The Case of the Non-Native Speaking Teacher

You are the owner of a private language school in Southern California. Your institution serves approximately 60 – 80 students at any one time. Your students are primarily from Asia, but European and Latin American students attend your school as well. Your students can be characterized as follows:

They rely on their parents' money and/or they have been in the workforce and saved money to come to the United States for language study, as well as to travel and sightsee. These students are typically in their late teens to early twenties. Most of them stay in your program for about one to three months, though some of them are here for perhaps only two weeks and others for as long as nine to 12 months. Because the language goal of these students is primarily social English, your curriculum is not heavy on writing or grammar. Instead, it centers on conversation skills, utilizing authentic listening and reading tasks as the basis for classroom activities and discussions.

There are six teachers in your school. All of them have a Master's degree in TESOL or linguistics and have a minimum of three years of teaching experience. Two of your teachers are non-native speakers of English. One, named Mariana, is from Brazil. She taught English in her home country for seven years prior to coming to the U.S. to obtain her Master's in TESOL from a well-known university. For two years she has been one of your most hard-working, dedicated, and enthusiastic teachers. The other NNS instructor is Wan-Yi ("Wendy"), who is from Taiwan. She, too, received her MA in the U.S. and has been working for your school since she began her teaching career four years ago. Wendy has a quick intellect and a solid SLA knowledge-base. You characterize her as a "natural teacher."

You have known both of these teachers for several years, and you have a good relationship with them, personally as well as professionally. Your assessment of their teaching skills is very high. Each of them has a good command of the English language, although Wendy has a more noticeable accent than Mariana, and she sometimes makes more grammatical mistakes. However, her errors are not likely impede her communica-

tion with – or teaching of – her students. As a language teacher and program administrator, you believe that being a nonnative speaker should not necessarily disqualify someone from the profession. Teaching skills and abilities matter most, and these two women are perfect examples to support your position. Today, however, a student who is new to your program came to your office and made a complaint. "I'm not happy with one of my teachers," he said. "I paid a lot of money and I traveled a long way to be here. I want an American teacher. I could have had a teacher like her in my home country."

You explained to the student that a person does not need to be a native speaker in order to be an effective language teacher. You shared with him your assessment of the teaching skills possessed by and favorable student evaluations of the teacher in question. The student was not convinced, however, and demanded a tuition refund and assistance in finding a different language school. You finally persuaded the student to stay in his classes one more week before he makes a final decision. After he left your office, you began to question whether you are *too* loyal to your two NNS teachers. Does the student have a valid complaint? After all, "The customer is always right."

## Appendix B: Sample Tasks for Working with Case Studies

*Task 1: Questions for Discussion*
Directions: With your group members, discuss the following questions based on the case study. Be prepared to share your responses with the class.

- Should you persuade the student to remain in your program and stay in the class of the NNS teacher? Or should you simply assist him to find another school where he believes he will be happy?
- Is your relationship with the two teachers affecting your opinion on this issue?

- What are the *disadvantages* of having a NNS language teacher?
- What are the *advantages* of having a NNS language teacher?
- How does the context of the situation affect your opinion? In other words, would the situation be different if this were a school located outside the U.S.? What if your school served a different type of students? What if it were a public rather than private institution?
- Are some nonnative-speaking teachers "less nonnative" or "more nonnative" than others? If so, how? How might this affect your actions in this situation?
- Is a nonnative speaker ALWAYS acceptable as a teacher? How about NEVER acceptable?
- By what criteria would you determine whether a NNS is acceptable or not?
- Are there *nonlinguistic* advantages and/or disadvantages to having a NNS teacher?

### Task 2: Group Presentation of Case Analysis

Directions: Based on your small group discussion, be prepared to summarize your responses to two or more of the discussion questions. Class members will have the opportunity to engage in critical, reflective discussion on the presenters' points.

### Task 3: Online Case Reflection

Directions: Log in to the online learning platform. Write a reflective response to the two prompts below. After writing your own reflection, respond to at least two of your classmates' posts.

Prompt 1: Have you worked with, supervised, or studied under a NNS teacher in the past? If so, comment on that experience.

Prompt 2: Would *you* hire a NNS teacher if you were in a position to do so? What factors might influence your decision? Have you ever, in fact, hired (or chose not to hire) an NNS teacher?

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