CHRISTINE ROELL

Germany

Using a Case Study in the EFL Classroom

A case study is a teaching method based on the description of a real or hypothetical situation that requires a solution or action. No analysis is provided, so learners analyze the case themselves to make a decision or produce possible solutions. Case studies have been in use for several decades to train students in business, law, medicine, and other disciplines by exposing them to situations they are likely to encounter in their professional practice. Case studies are considered effective because "by presenting content in the format of a narrative accompanied by questions and activities that promote group discussion and solving of complex problems, case studies facilitate development of the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive learning; moving beyond recall of knowledge to analysis, evaluation, and application" (Bonney 2015, 21).

Case studies are also useful for training learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) because to find a solution to a case study, the learners need to apply linguistic skills in combination with analytical and/or interpersonal skills—the kind of situation that can occur in "real life," outside the classroom. Case studies, a form of task-based learning (TBL), allow teachers to implement the communicative approach: the central focus is on completing a task, and students use language as a tool to communicate their ideas of doing language exercises to practice a grammar point or lexical item. TBL is considered conducive to language learning because it is learner-centered and engages students in active learning by providing opportunities for authentic communication. The focus of the task is on meaning; it has "a clearly defined, non-linguistic outcome" (Ellis 2003, 162), and learners select the linguistic resources they need to complete the task. The teacher's role is that of a facilitator and

advisor who circulates among the students and is available for language-related questions.

This article gives general guidelines for EFL teachers interested in incorporating case studies in their teaching; it also provides an example of a case study that can be used as is or as a model that teachers can adapt to their needs.

LANGUAGE LEARNING AND THE CASE-STUDY METHOD

The case-study method is particularly suitable for involving students in spoken interactions, such as discussions. According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, the skills required for formal discussions include the "ability to follow the discussion" by "understanding points given prominence, keeping up with animated debate" and the "ability to contribute" by "probing, evaluating and challenging the

contributions of others and arguing one's own position convincingly" (Council of Europe 2018, 87). A case study also supports interactions through "goal-oriented co-operation" that leads to "collaborative, task-focused work," such as "discussing a document" (Council of Europe 2018, 88). Furthermore, case studies provide training in reading comprehension, audiovisual or aural comprehension (when students watch a video or listen to a recording), and possibly written and oral production, such as writing a report or addressing an audience when presenting solutions.

Case studies can be tailored to different language levels and teaching situations, such as English for specific purposes (ESP) or content-based learning (language acquisition combined with the study of a subject matter). Topics may range from everyday issues to high-content cases that require in-depth subject-matter knowledge and involve the analysis of accompanying data such as graphs, charts, and other supporting documents. The more complex the case is, the more specific the knowledge and the more specialized the

language students will need. High-context cases are therefore suitable for learners who have sufficient proficiency in English and specialized knowledge about the subject; this is the case for many ESP students studying business, engineering, or other subjects. If teachers want to create their own subject-specific case studies, they may consider the possibility of collaborating with a specialist subject teacher.

Table 1 summarizes advantages and challenges of the case-study method.

CASE-STUDY TOPICS

A case study should be based on the description of a particular situation or conflict-arousing issue to which students can relate. Teachers can use ready-made cases studies that are included in some coursebook packs and found on reputable Internet sites, or they can write their own cases. Teachers can create original cases based on current affairs or on topics contained in the coursebook. Articles and other materials (videos, practical tips, PDF brochures, menus, etc.) available on

Advantages	Challenges
• Task-based learning can be implemented, and language is used to communicate. • Language skills are used in combination with other skills (e.g., business, interpersonal, and problem-solving skills). • Integration of various language skills is possible. • Different media can be included. • Some cases can incorporate role plays. • Students may generate their own cases.	• Teachers must find case studies that are suitable for their learners regarding content, complexity, and linguistic level, or they must write the case studies themselves. • Reading and analyzing longer case studies can be time-consuming. • Assessment criteria need to be carefully established, explained, and considered.

Table 1. Advantages and challenges of using case studies to support language learning

The more complex the case is, the more specific the knowledge and the more specialized the language students will need.

the Internet can either be used as source texts for the case study or be adapted for classroom use. Printed materials, such as informational and tourist brochures, are also useful. Topic areas that teachers of general English courses may consider include the following:

- planning a weekend in a specific town, reconciling the various interests of group members

- choosing a restaurant suitable for people with different dietary requirements

- planning a vacation on a budget for a group or family at a specific destination

- advising somebody on how to reduce plastic waste in daily life

- advising somebody on how to lead a healthier lifestyle

- planning an intercultural party

- evaluating a brochure

- evaluating apartment rental offers

Some publishers offer materials that can be used as short case studies for business English. For example, *In Company* from Macmillan Business offers downloadable worksheets on several business topics in English at different levels (see http://www.businessenglishonline.net/resources/in-company-second-edition-resources/worksheets/). Other online information is available on these and other business-related topics and can be accessed by entering the relevant keywords into a search engine:

- exploring reasons for the success or failure of an actual business takeover or merger

- evaluating a marketing campaign

- marketing a product

- studying the features of an energy-efficient office building

- organizing an international conference

- weighing the advantages and disadvantages of electric vehicles as company cars

- improving the accessibility of an office building

- choosing a location for a company

- choosing a trade fair to exhibit a company's products

On its website, Carleton College offers sample case studies for disciplines such as biology, business, economics, and health sciences (see https://serc.carleton.edu/sp/library/cases/examples.html). Davis and Wilcock (2003, 12) outline some topics suitable for case studies in science and engineering, including "to illustrate why given materials are used for a particular application" (metallic bicycle components) and "to demonstrate the application of theoretical concepts in an item of sporting equipment" (windsurfing masts).

A mini–case study for beginning or intermediate learners may be just one or two pages long (an example is presented below), while more-complex case studies can be ten pages or longer. Case studies are suitable for a range of class sizes because a large class can be divided into groups, usually of about six students. The resolution of a simple case study frequently involves making suggestions or deciding on the best option. Teachers can use a short case study after having covered a topic as a way to give students the opportunity to apply the

> ## A case study should be based on the description of a particular situation or conflict-arousing issue to which students can relate.

language they have learned, combining it with skills required to communicate effectively in meetings and presentations. Dealing with longer, complex cases is time-consuming, so it is recommended that students read the material and answer guiding questions for homework before class. If complex case studies are used, teachers need to consider how to integrate them into the course syllabus.

IMPLEMENTING THE CASE STUDY

According to the BU Center for Teaching & Learning (n.d.), a case study usually consists of the following features:

- A decision-maker who is grappling with a question or problem that needs to be solved

- A description of the problem's context (a law, an industry, a family)

- Supporting data, which can range from data tables to links to URLs, quoted statements or testimony, supporting documents, images, video, and audio

General guidelines and steps for implementing a case study

The following guidelines can help students write a case study:

- When you are writing a case study, you are *telling a story*. Do not analyze the situation; just describe it.

- You need to address the following questions:

  o Who are the protagonists, and what are their roles? (Change the names if they are based on real people.)

  o What are the key problems and issues?

  o What background information and relevant facts do others need to know to understand the case?

- Make sure your story is coherent. This means that the argumentation needs to be consistent. The order of events—the timeline—must be easy for a reader to follow, and the relationship between cause and effect in the events must be clear.

- Provide *supporting data* if necessary (links to statistics, facts about the problem, a video that provides useful background information, etc.).

- Use *paragraphs* to structure the information. Each paragraph should be limited to the discussion of one aspect of your story and backed up with details. When you move on to another aspect, start a new paragraph.

The case-study method usually involves the following steps:

Step 1: The teacher introduces the situation and, if necessary, relevant vocabulary.

Step 2: Everyone reads the case study and analyzes additional materials.

The following procedure can help students analyze a case systematically:

  o describe the context of the situation/problem

  o describe the main issues/problems

  o describe the causes of the problem (there is usually more than one)

o   identify possible solutions

o   determine the advantages and disadvantages of each option

o   decide on the best solution/action

Step 3: Students discuss possible solutions, usually in small groups.

Students may visually represent the aspects of the case by drawing a mind map or mapping out the elements of the story and the relationships of the people involved, causes of the problem, and possible solutions.

Step 4: Students present and justify the solutions, usually with the whole class.

Step 5: Everyone participates in a feedback session, typically led by the teacher.

Step 6: Students reflect on the case study itself and on the procedure.

The duration of each step, particularly the reading and discussion stages, depends on the length and complexity of the case study.

CONSIDERATIONS BEFORE IMPLEMENTING A CASE STUDY

Teachers should address the following questions before initiating a case study:

1. Features of the case study
- What is the estimated time needed for the analysis of the case study and the presentation and discussion of solutions?

- Is the case study realistic and complex enough—does it have sufficient facts and background information, and are supporting documents provided that are essential for solving the case?

- Do students have to research additional information? If so, how can they access it? Are questions provided to guide students?

- How will solutions be presented—through whole-class discussions, with presentations, or in a final report?

2. Students' prior knowledge and motivation
- Can students relate to the situation presented in the case study, and do they have the necessary experience to analyze and solve the problem?

- Do students have sufficient linguistic competence (lexical and grammatical knowledge) to understand the text, and are they able to produce the relevant vocabulary and grammatical structures during the discussion?

- Do students have the necessary knowledge of language functions to participate in a discussion (e.g., expressing an opinion, summarizing an argument, agreeing, disagreeing, interrupting politely, holding the floor when they want to continue speaking, reaching a negotiated conclusion)?

- Are students familiar with the conventions of the genres they are expected to produce, such as writing a report or making a presentation?

3. Assessment and feedback
- Will students be assessed? If so, what skills will be assessed? What criteria will be applied?

- Will there be reflection regarding the content and procedure of the case study?

By playing the role of someone else, student interviewees do not have to discuss their own strengths and weaknesses, which makes the situation less personal and less face-threatening.

- How will feedback on language and functional skills be provided?

EXAMPLE OF A SHORT CASE STUDY

This case study is suitable for students of different backgrounds and can be adapted. It actively involves learners and creates opportunities to communicate about a situation they can relate to or are familiar with. After studying the vocabulary of character traits, learners apply it to a specific case that resembles a real-life situation. Furthermore, they use their reading skills and employ their oral skills when interacting and expressing opinions with others. They also have the opportunity to practice their writing skills in a follow-up activity. The time needed is about 45 to 60 minutes.

Procedure:

1. Elicit from students character traits that are desirable for people in helping professions; write the traits on the board. Below is a list of personality traits that are desirable for social workers:

    - empathetic (able to understand how other people feel)

    - assertive (able to express their views clearly without being aggressive and to stand up for their own and other people's rights in a reasonable and clear way)

    - persistent (unwilling to give up easily)

    - reliable (can be counted on)

    - flexible (open-minded; willing to consider different points of view)

    - resilient (able to recover easily from difficult situations)

    - patient (able to stay calm and uncomplaining, especially in difficult situations)

    - committed to the job (willing to work hard to do a good job)

    - organized (able to plan procedures effectively and manage time well)

    - self-confident (confident in one's own abilities and knowledge)

2. Have students work individually or in small groups. Tell students that they will form part of a committee that selects a candidate for a nongovernmental organization (NGO). Give each student or group a handout with the description of the candidates (see Table 2) and the Candidate Assessment Form (see Table 3). If there are no photocopying facilities available, explain the situation to the students and read the information about each candidate to students so that they can take notes. Circulate among students to answer questions later.

3. Let students fill in the assessment form in Table 3. If there are no photocopying facilities, write the assessment template on the board for students to copy.

4. In small groups, have students decide on a candidate and present their arguments for selecting him or her for the NGO position. The teacher and other students can ask further questions along the lines of the following:

    - Does it make a difference if the job is done by a man or woman?

    - How important is a person's age for this type of job?

    - Would your choice have been influenced by knowing the people's names, especially names that hint at the person's ethnicity?

5. Provide feedback on language aspects, those that were strong and those that can be improved.

6. Assign a written task or homework. Ask students to comment on the importance of relevant training, professional experience, and interpersonal skills—in general or for a chosen profession.

The role-play option

The above case study has been used with students in the field of social work who have an intermediate level of English. It is a model that teachers can adapt to suit their needs by using a job offer that is relevant for their students and by devising profiles of suitable candidates. The profiles should match the requirements of the job but should have some weaknesses to make the case more realistic. Optionally, students can be asked to role-play the job interview. Doing so allows them to experience the environment of the case instead of just using their cognitive skills to analyze it.

Who is the best candidate for the job?

Situation

ASA is a nongovernmental organization that provides life skills and job-search skills to unemployed young people and to vulnerable adults in an effort to place them in a job or job training. Some of the clients have dropped out of school, and most of them have not completed a job-training program. The organization is looking for someone who will provide life-skills training for the clients to enable them to organize their daily routines, manage money, and manage frustration and conflict. The person should also be able to help clients with their application to find a job, an internship, or an opportunity for further education. Four people have been shortlisted for the job. In your opinion, who is the best candidate? Read the descriptions and fill in the assessment form.

Candidate 1

Candidate 1 is a trained school teacher. She holds a certificate in arts therapy (using art to overcome personal problems) and has implemented interesting school projects. She grew bored with her work at a private school and decided to look for a job in another sector. She is in her mid-30s and is an open-minded, creative, and assertive person.

Candidate 2

Candidate 2 is a social worker with a specialization in school social work. He has just graduated from university and has completed an internship as a street and outreach social worker. He has a friendly, patient, and reliable personality but is a bit shy.

Candidate 3

Candidate 3 is just under 30 years old. He does not have much experience as a social worker, but he has worked in various casual jobs before obtaining a social-work degree. He has lived in difficult and even dangerous conditions in some cities and has been homeless for a short time. The candidate has a cheerful and lively personality and is committed to helping disadvantaged people. However, he does not seem very interested in the paperwork and the bureaucracy that form part of the job.

Candidate 4

Candidate 4 is in her 50s. She has many years of experience as a social worker, particularly working with young people who are dealing with problems. She has changed jobs several times, mostly because she did not seem to get along with her bosses. She is an assertive person and takes a strict attitude toward her clients.

Table 2. Description of situation and job candidates

CANDIDATE ASSESSMENT FORM

Assign points to each candidate by using the following scale:

     1 – Meets all of the requirements

     2 – Meets most of the requirements

     3 – Meets some of the requirements

     4 – Does not meet any of the requirements

Candidate 1

Educational Background	Relevant Job Experience	Interpersonal Skills	Strengths/ Weaknesses
1 2 3 4 Comments:	1 2 3 4 Comments:	1 2 3 4 Comments:	

Candidate 2

Educational Background	Relevant Job Experience	Interpersonal Skills	Strengths/ Weaknesses
1 2 3 4 Comments:	1 2 3 4 Comments:	1 2 3 4 Comments:	

Candidate 3

Educational Background	Relevant Job Experience	Interpersonal Skills	Strengths/ Weaknesses
1 2 3 4 Comments:	1 2 3 4 Comments:	1 2 3 4 Comments:	

Candidate 4

Educational Background	Relevant Job Experience	Interpersonal Skills	Strengths/ Weaknesses
1 2 3 4 Comments:	1 2 3 4 Comments:	1 2 3 4 Comments:	

Table 3. Candidate Assessment Form

The students who serve on the interview panel prepare interview questions (see Table 4). They can devise an assessment sheet or use the form in Table 3; interviewees create their own profile (see Table 5). By playing the role of someone else, student interviewees do not have to discuss their own strengths and weaknesses, which makes the situation less personal and less face-threatening. After the interviews, the interview panel decides on the best candidate. The ideal number of participants for the role play is six or seven students, depending on the number of candidates. Larger groups can be divided to conduct separate role plays.

During the reflection stage, the panel's decision is discussed, and students comment on the experience of participating in the role play. The teacher gives feedback on students' performances. In addition, students should have an opportunity to make suggestions on aspects of the case study that could be adapted or improved.

STUDENT-GENERATED CASE STUDIES

An interesting option—although it may not be practical in every teaching situation—is for students to create a case study based on their own experiences inside or outside school. They might create a study on a professional situation or a problem they are familiar with,

such a business challenge or the risks to privacy that the inconsiderate use of social networks entails. The case study can then be used in class for analysis and discussion, with the goal being to discuss and decide on reasonable solutions and approaches for dealing with the situation or problem. Students should have an intermediate or advanced level of English and be familiar with the case-study method.

CONCLUSION

Using case studies requires some planning and preparation but can be an exciting method in the language-learning classroom. Students are more actively engaged when solving a problem than when just reading a text and answering questions. The method allows EFL learners to practice different types of language skills in communicative situations and combine linguistic skills with analytical and/or interpersonal skills. In addition, the case-study method is highly adaptable in terms of topic areas, complexity of content, linguistic difficulty, and length. If necessary, teachers can write their own simple cases or create more-complex case studies in collaboration with colleagues who teach specific subject areas. Students themselves can create original case studies as a way to relate the method to their own interests and experiences.

You form part of the interview panel. Based on the job offer, you and the other members of the interview panel make a list of questions you want to ask the candidates about their motivations to apply for the job, their qualifications, and their experience. Include behavioral questions such as, "Tell us how you have handled a difficult situation." You also need to create an assessment form. Then interview the candidates and take notes on their answers. After the interviews, you and the other members of the panel decide on the best candidate.

Table 4. Role card for the members of the interview panel

You have been invited to a job interview. Based on the job offer, create your profile. It should fit the job profile and include strengths and one or two weaknesses (nobody is perfect). Prepare yourself for the interview: How are you going to present your qualifications, experiences, and strengths? How can you present your weaknesses in a positive way?

Table 5. Role card for the interviewees

An interesting option … is for students to create a case study based on their own experiences inside or outside school.

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Christine Roell is a lecturer of English and Spanish at the University of Applied Sciences in Nordhausen, Germany. Her interests are using the Internet for language teaching, English for specific purposes, task-based learning, and intercultural communication.