

A Research-Based Approach to Utilizing Business Case Studies in ELT

Rebekka Eckhaus, NYU School of Professional Studies Tokyo

JALT CUE ESP Symposium at Keio University—Saturday, September 16, 2017

Abstract

Many Business English classrooms utilize business case studies, but rarely have instructors read the research informing best practices for ELT. This poster will map the progression of research on the use of business cases in ESP from the 1980s when it started to gain popularity. Furthermore, main lessons gleaned from the research will be highlighted for teachers and practitioners interested in learning how to use or how to refine their use of cases with NNESS.

Rationale

Business case studies are often used in Business English ESP (ESP-B) contexts for the various benefits they provide students. The presenter has utilized cases and the case study approach in a U.S. pre-MBA certificate program, an in-company South Korean “mini-MBA” program, and a professional development English program in Japan. Though language program administration or management may expect instructors to use business cases, how can teachers address the challenges cases pose with research-based solutions?

Research Timeline: 1980’s to Present

For over three decades, research on the use of case studies in ESP-B has been explored, not only the advantages but also many of the challenges and disadvantages.

Piotrowski, 1982

Proposes using the case method, esp. for advanced executives, because of the relevant and motivating content. Instructor guidance is included.

Grosse, 1988

Explores benefits and challenges of utilizing cases, but concludes that the advantages of business cases outweigh the difficulties. Summarizes benefits and problems associated with: 1) case study materials, 2) case study method, and 3) teacher mastery of method and material.

Westerfield, 1989

Reports on a pre-MBA course for NNS which uses a video method to improve “fluency in small-group discussion.” Guidelines for the video method are provided.

Boyd, 1991

Examines fundamental differences between ESP-B and MBA programs to recommend the best uses of case method for their purposes.

Jackson*, 1998

Presents a framework for utilizing cases in ESP teacher education, addressing ESP teacher concerns about case implementation through practice and reflection. Many practical steps can be directly transferred to ESP-B classroom lesson design.

Kleinfeld, 1990

Discusses pros and cons of case method for teacher training. Content relevant for ESP-B context.

Nagel, 1991

Recommends case method for training administrators for leadership and management skills. Content relevant for ESP-B context.

Boyce, 1993

Recommends case study approach to bridge theory and practice while encouraging active learning, problem-solving, alternative solutions, and the exploration of actions & consequences.

Mostert & Sudzina, 1996

Explores use of case studies to educate pre-service, undergraduate teachers. Relevant challenges such as those found in ESP-B (e.g., case leader preparation).

Jackson*, 2004

Interviews and surveys business case Ts and Ss about worth of case method and associated problems, suggesting necessity for “culture-specific case methodology training for both case leaders and students.”

Esteban & Cañado, 2004

Directly addresses how to deal with challenges of the case study method in ESP-B.

Nathan 2010, 2013, 2016

Analyzes corpus data to compare NS and NNS rhetorical moves in business case reports. Implications for teaching business case writing to NNSs.

* Dr. Jackson has published extensively on the topic of business cases. Visit her webpage for a list of her research: http://www.eng.cuhk.edu.hk/?page_id=817

For Teachers

Research on the use of business case studies in the ELL classroom can help inform our teaching practicing—making the lessons and activities more meaningful and productive for students and teachers alike.

References for relevant publications have been included in the column on the left. Tips for classroom implementation have been extracted and summarized in the column below.

Teaching Tips

Approaching business cases in the ESP-B classroom

Boyd (1991) – A fundamental difference exists between the use of business cases in MBA programs and in ESP-B.

- MBA: Goal is for Ss to learn “how to think like business managers”
- ESP-B: Goal is for Ss to learn “how to communicate like business managers”

Advantages of using business cases

- Business cases provide authentic materials with business concepts & cultural information available in various languages (e.g., Harvard Business Publishing) (Grosse, 1988).
- Cases foster content-based, learner-centered approach to problem solving with integrated skills and communicative activities (Piotrowski, 1982; Grosse, 1988; Westerfield, 1989; Boyd, 1991; Jackson, 1998; Boyce, 1993)
- Many resources are available—a variety of cases, as well as books explaining the case method (Piotrowski, 1982; Grosse, 1988).
- Business experts & colleagues can support ELTs (no need to be a business expert) (Grosse, 1988).

Potential challenges of using cases

- Materials must be adapted for ESL/EFL context depending on Ss’ level, including exercises, activities, and lesson design (Grosse, 1988; Boyd, 1991; ; Esteban & Cañado, 2004).
- Learner-centered classroom is necessary as T usually is not the expert in business content or case method; T must sacrifice strict classroom control (Grosse, 1988; Jackson, 1998).
- Success of the method depends highly on the teacher’s preparation and case method competence, as well as students’ attitudes and buy-in (Piotrowski, 1982; Esteban & Cañado, 2004).

Recommendations for dealing with the challenges of case implementation

Choose your cases wisely. (Westerfield, 1989; some points are mirrored by Jackson, 1998)

- Choose business content relevant to Ss, including cultural context.
- Look for cases with accompanying teacher notes.
- Pick appropriate case length. (An average case on the Harvard site may be 20 pages; search in “brief cases” for aprox. 10-page cases. Remember that cases are business stories, so you may find more appropriate material simply searching the internet.)
- Select the right type of case. Do you want your Ss to make a decision (usually most appropriate for ESP-B contexts), evaluate others’ decisions, or analyze a situation/company?

Modify cases as necessary.

- Adapt cases—they can be rewritten or shortened (Westerfield, 1989; Boyd, 1991)

Incorporate language focused activities.

- Present idioms and key grammar structures before teaching the case (Piotrowski, 1982; Westerfield, 1989).
- Scaffold with general reading strategies: prediction; pre-reading questions; skim for key words/ideas; re-read in more detail; break analysis into steps; prepare Ss for no “right answer” (Westerfield, 1989).
- Corpus data can be better utilized to ensure authentic language is being taught (Nathan 2010, 2013, 2016).

Prepare communicative activities that will motivate ESP-B learners.

- Consider lessons with “small & whole group discussions, role plays, simulations and problem-solving” (Grosse, 1988, p. 134).
- Include functions such as negotiating, letter writing, guest lectures, on-site visits, pronunciation & presentation skills, simulated business meetings, etc. (Boyd, 1991).
- Break cases into smaller units and use audio & video support (Boyd, 1991).
- Use teamwork so that students can support each other (Esteban & Cañado, 2004).
- Connect assessment and evaluation to learning goals (Esteban & Cañado, 2004); consider video feedback (Westerfield, 1989; Boyd, 1991).

Use a basic lesson setup (directly from Jackson, 1998 in context of ESP teacher training).

- Individual analysis and preparation (usually outside class)
- Informal small group discussion (in or outside class)
- Debriefing

Rebekka Eckhaus is a full-time English Lecturer and Program Coordinator at NYU School of Professional Studies Tokyo. She holds an MA in TESOL and has taught in universities and companies in New York City, Tokyo, Seoul, and Valparaiso (Chile). Her current research interests include ESP, multilingualism, learner autonomy, and blended learning.