Using a Case Study in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract: A case study is a teaching method based on the description of a real or hypothetical situation that requires a solution or action. 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.

Keywords: Case study, method, language, EFL classroom, technology.

INTRODUCTION

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 instead 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.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

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.

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

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.

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 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

➢ 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

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:

➢ describe the context of the situation/ problem

➢ describe the main issues/problems

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

➢ identify possible solutions

➢ determine the advantages and disadvantages of each option

➢ 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.

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.

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