

CASE STUDY AS AN INTERACTIVE METHOD OF TEACHING BUSINESS ENGLISH

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Abstract

Business English teaching focuses on developing both the language and the style of typical business skills, which are primarily for dealing with customers, clients and colleagues. The students may well have these skills in their own language, but Business English teaching emphasizes the difference in style required for running business in English. The focus is then on courteous language that attracts, establishes and sustains good business. The present paper deals with the issue of implementing the interactive methods, approaches and activities in the teaching of Business English to the non-native undergraduates who have no experience of the business world. The interactive practice such as “case study” that will be discussed in this paper is the results of our observation and experience of teaching Business English to students who are studying in business areas such as Business Administration, Marketing, Accountancy and Finance at the Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova. Generally, these pre-experienced students gain their knowledge of business largely in the classroom and from the books, and as a result, such knowledge is incomplete and theoretical rather than practical. They are also less aware of their language needs in terms of communicating in real life business situations. Therefore, “case studies” help them bridge the gap between theory and practice and between the academy and the workplace. Sample activities will be provided to show the practicality of the implementation of interactive methods and approaches

Key-words: business English teaching; case study; communication skills; interactive methods; teamwork.

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1. INTRODUCERE

Teaching Business English is far more than teaching Business or Language. It is about teaching communication skills in the authentic business contexts. It focuses on developing both the language and the style of typical business skills, which are primarily for dealing with customers, clients and colleagues. These specific skills required are: a) speaking skills: telephone conversations, negotiations, presentations, meetings and socializing in the work place and b) workplace writing skills: minutes, emails, faxes, reports, letters, memos, etc. in general business areas such as general management, human resources, marketing, accounting, finance and administration. The students may well have these skills in their own language, but Business English teaching emphasizes the difference in style required for running business in English. The focus is then on courteous language that attracts, establishes and sustains good business.

Business English teaching is particularly centered on interactive, student-focused teaching methods. Students should actively participate in communication tasks, which can be transferred to their real work situations. For example, brainstorming, role-play, debate and case study appear to be quite beneficial to the Business English setting, imitating situations that are identical to the students' future real-life work circumstances. This paper deals with the issue of implementing the interactive methods, approaches and activities in teaching of Business English to the non-native students in full-time education preparing for career in business and who have no experience of the business world. The interactive practice such as “case study” that will be discussed in this paper is the results of our observation and experience of teaching Business English to students who are studying in business areas such as Business Administration, Marketing, Accountancy and Finance at the Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova. Generally, these pre-experienced students gain their knowledge of business largely in the classroom and from the books. As a result, such knowledge is incomplete and theoretical rather than practical. Our students are also less aware of their language needs in terms of communicating in real life business situations. Therefore, “case studies” will help them bridge the gap between theory and practice and between the academy and

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the workplace. Sample activities will be presented to show the practicality of the implementation of interactive methods and approaches.

2. "CASE STUDY" AS AN INTERACTIVE METHOD OF TEACHING BUSINESS ENGLISH FOR NON-NATIVE STUDENTS IN FULL-TIME EDUCATION PREPARING FOR CAREER IN BUSINESS

Nowadays, cross-cultural communicative competence considered as a unity of linguistic, communicative and sociocultural components is the basis of methodical requirements of teaching Business English. Therefore, as a function of language pedagogy, along with some information tasks, such aspects of teaching that should determine the possibility of providing adequate communicative behaviour in the country of the target language and the acquaintance with value reference points, typical for parties in contact, are conceptually included. In order to achieve this goal, modern interactive methods and techniques of teaching are used. Among them are: cooperative learning, "tandem" method, business games, projects, role-playing, distance learning, the use of the language portfolio, and simulation exercises, "case study". According to Anisimov, the implementation of interactive methods develops thinking ability and motivation of students and provides the formation of the intellectual culture and self-development skills [Korneyeva, 2004]. Interactive training is aimed primarily at the development of interaction between students. The teacher in this case acts mainly as a coordinator, guiding the communicative process. Teacher's main role is to provide students with proper conditions for comfortable interaction in order to solve specific educational problems by engaging their own social experience.

The majority of pre-experienced students, who are pursuing their studies for a degree in economics at the Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova, are surely familiar with the method of case study. For the others, case study is probably something not very clear. The "case study" method is increasingly being used not only as a Business English teaching method, but also as a method of staff selection. "Case studies" represent the scenarios that apply the concepts learned in the classroom in the "real life" situation. Usually they are presented in narrative form, and often include problem solving, links to some course readings, and discussions by groups of students. According to Professor Paul Lawrence, a good case study presents the vehicle by which a chunk of reality is brought into the classroom to be worked over by the class and the instructor. A good case keeps the class discussion grounded upon some of the stubborn facts that students can face in real life situations. [Lawrence, 2010]

Whereas the case-study method is most widely used in teaching economics, management science, and business, law and medicine, this method of teaching may as well be an effective strategy in many other areas. It is considered the one of the «advanced» active teaching methods. As an educational technique, "case studies" have a number of advantages. They can "bridge the gap between theory and practice and between the academy and the workplace". [Barkley, 2005] They also solve several educational problems:

- develop communication skills, helps establish emotional contact between the learners;
- teach to work in team, cooperate and collaborate;
- provide students with the information necessary to implement learning activities;
- develop learning skills and intellectual abilities (analysis, synthesis, goal setting, critical thinking, etc.);
- give students opportunity to practice recognizing the problem parameters, identifying and articulating ideas assessing options for actions, and arguing different points of view;
- help get rid of stress and the language barrier;
- enhance learning efficiency.

Teaching Business English communication using the method above mentioned requires that both the teacher and students possess a number of developed professional communicative abilities. They both should be able: to perceive and evaluate the information coming in both verbal and non-verbal form; to carry out diagnostics and analysis of the problem; to formulate and logically

construct a statement according to the rules of language; to take part in a discussion and to participate in collective decision-making.

“Case studies” vary in length and details, and can be used in a different ways, depending on the case itself and on the teacher’s goals. An effective “case study” is one that, according to Davis:

- tells a “real” and engaging story;
- raises a thought-provoking issue;
- has elements of conflict;
- promotes empathy with the central characters;
- lacks an obvious or clear-cut right answer;
- encourages students to think and take a position;
- portrays actors in moments of decision;
- provides plenty of data about character, location, context, actions;
- is relatively concise. [Davis, 1993]

In spite of the fact that there are a lot of ways in how the interactive method “case study” can be applied, we are ready to present the six main steps, which provide a common basis for how to use it and run the discussion:

Step 1. Understanding the situation

In this stage, the students have to read and analyse the background information and think about the case. If the case is complex, the teacher can give it as a home task with a set of questions.

Step 2. Diagnosing problem areas

In the second step, the teacher introduces the case and give some instructions for how to approach it and how to consider the problem.

Step 3. Generating alternative solutions

In this stage, the students are working in small groups discussing the business problem and generating solutions. The teacher monitors them and encourages everyone to participate and interact with each other. Thus, it is a great idea to formulate the task of each group very precise. He or she may also distribute the roles inside each small group. So even very timid students could have an opportunity to participate in the decision-making process generating alternative solutions.

Step 4. Predicting outcomes

In the fourth step, the groups present their solutions: when students know they are in charge of a presentation, analysis decisions to present to the class, they should be involved in the discussion with greater sobriety. They write their conclusions on the board so that the class can return to them in the discussion that follows.

Step 5. Evaluating alternatives

The fifth step - asking questions for clarification and moving discussion to another level. One of the most important point for a “case study” based discussion leader is to moderate the discussion and probe for deeper analysis. As the discussion unfolds, the students examine their own assumptions and share with each other their solutions giving the reasons, substantiate their claims, provide illustrations, etc.

Step 6. Communicating the results

The sixth step consists in synthesize issues raised. It is important to bring different strands of the discussion back together at the end of lesson, thus students can see what they have learnt and so that they have some feedback from their work. [<http://www.cmu.edu>]

Some options on this general method include having students do outside research, individually or in groups, to bring to bear on the case in question, and comparing the actual outcome of a real-life dilemma to the solutions generated in classroom.

3. IMPLEMENTING “CASE STUDY” AS AN INTERACTIVE METHOD IN TEACHING BUSINESS ENGLISH

The interactive method of case study is a tool to apply the theoretical knowledge to solve practical problems from real business life. It develops students' critical thinking, the ability to listen to and consider an alternative point of view and to express their own arguments. Using this method, students have the opportunity to demonstrate and improve their analytical skills and learn to work as a team to find the most efficient solution to the problem.

The using of the case study method at the Business English lessons has two complementary objectives, and namely, to further improve the linguistic and socio-cultural competences and the formation of professional skills of students.

Business English language activity is carried out in the following sequence: studying (reading and listening) of the background information contained in a case, identifying the most important information, the exchange of ideas how to solve the problem, (discussion on developing solutions), discussion of the final decision, preparation of the report in oral or written form. In the chart below, we can see an example of case study, which refers to the topic “Trade”, with the title “Ashbury Guitars”, language level: B1, according to CERFL. [CERFL, 2011].

CASE STUDY

The Kim Guitar Company (KGC) in Seoul, South Korea, makes electric guitars for Japanese manufacturers and distributors in Europe and the US. It creates its own branded products but also makes guitars to distributors specifications.

A major US distributor, Ashbury Guitars, has contacted KGC about marketing a range of guitars under its own brand name for the Californian market. Ashbury Guitars is a well-established company with an up-market image. It has had no previous dealings with KGC. Ashbury' owner, David Green, plans to put two models on the market: the Ashbury SG1000 (the most expensive model), the SG500 and SG200. The body of the guitars will have an experimental shape as well as advanced technical features. Ashbury' guitars will appeal to any musician who wants an instrument with a distinctive sound and exotic appearance.

It is now early January. KGC has agreed to manufacture the guitars for Ashbury, even though it is a very busy time of the year for them. The two companies have had some initial correspondence by fax and now a face-to-face meeting is required.

Several points of the contract need to be negotiated. KGC's owner, Jerry Kim has flown to San Francisco to meet David Green. At the meeting, the Marketing Director of each company will be present. The purpose of the meeting is to make a deal acceptable to both sides, and which could be the basis for a long-term relationship. [Cotton, 2001].

Chart 1. Case Study “Ashbury Guitars”

The technology of work with a present case “Ashbury Guitars” in the learning process includes the following stages:

Stage1: Background

- The students have to study the background information.
- The teacher writes the headings on the left-hand side of the table and elicit information from students to complete their right-hand side.

COMPANY 1	<i>Kim Guitar Company (KGC)</i>
BASED IN	<i>Seoul, South Korea</i>
OWNER	<i>David Kim</i>
ACTIVITY	<i>Guitar manufacturing</i>
CUSTOMERS	<i>Japanese manufacturers and distributors in the US and Europe</i>
COMPANY 2	<i>Ashbury Guitars</i>
BASED IN	<i>San Francisco, US</i>
OWNER	<i>Richard Grant</i>
ACTIVITY	<i>Guitar Distribution</i>
REPUTATION	<i>Well-established, up-market</i>
INTERESTED IN	<i>Ashbury SG1000 (the most expensive model), the SG500 and SG200</i>
SHAPE	<i>Experimental</i>
TECHNICAL FEATURES	<i>Advanced</i>
DATE	<i>Early January</i>
SITUATION	<i>KGC has agreed to manufacture guitars for Ashbury, despite it being busy time of year. Meeting required.</i>
OBJECTIVES OF MEETING	<i>Finalise deal. Establish long-term relationship</i>
OTHER PEOPLE INVOLVED	<i>Marketing Directors of each company</i>

Chart 2. Case-Study “Ashbury Guitars” Background [Hall, 2001]

Stage 2: Preparation

The teacher gives task to the students that they should negotiate an agreement between the two companies as either:

- The KGC team: Jerry Kim and Marketing Director (read the information file on the card)
- The Ashbury team: David Green and Marketing Director (read the information file on the card) Guidelines:

The group should be divided into 2 teams of their choice; the teacher should give time on the distribution of roles, the formulation of strategy and tactics of behaviour during negotiations. Teacher's role is reduced to monitoring and, if necessary, to assist the teams.

Stage 3: Negotiation

- The students role-play the negotiation (an agreement between two companies) and discuss questions they have to.
- The teacher monitors the language being used for good points and points that need correction, especially in relation to negotiating language.

Stage 4: Feedback

- The teacher brings the class to order and praises strong points that she/he heard or works on points that need correction or improvement, getting students model the correct forms.
- The students share their experience and opinions on what happened in their negotiations.

Stage 5: Writing

The students are encouraged to write an e-mail of 200 to 300 words, summarizing the points agreed during the negotiation, not forgetting to indicate any terms of the contract requiring discussion or clarification.

This case study and many others offered to our students in the framework of Business English Course are linked to the business topic according to curricula. They are based on realistic business problems or situations and are designed to motivate and actively engage students, who use the language and communication skills, they have acquired while working through the topic. All students are involved in discussing business problems and recommending solutions through active teamwork.

Each case study ends with a realistic writing task, which reflects the real world of business correspondence and helps students preparing for business career.

CONCLUSION

Summarizing the above mentioned, it should again be noted that the “case study” as an interactive and efficient method of teaching Business English for non-native students in full-time education preparing for business career provides them with an excellent opportunity to further improve and practice their communicative skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing) in realistic business situations. This interactive method provides the development of the stable skills and ability to analyse a situation, evaluate the alternatives, and choose the best option in order to solve the practical problems. Undoubtedly, it is important that the analysis and working on the situation has quite a strong impact on the professionalization of students, promotes their maturation, generates interest and motivation to further learn. The function field of cases provides a lot of possibilities and complements the traditional classical methods of teaching Business English.

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