



VIETNAMESE EFL INSTRUCTORS' PERCEPTIONS OF CASE-BASED LEARNING IN A COMMUNICATION COURSE

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Abstract:

This article presents a qualitative research study that aims to evaluate the use of the case-based learning (CBL) method in an English communication course at a Vietnamese university from the perspective of instructors. The study collected data from three instructors who tried the CBL method in a communication course. The findings show that the instructors perceived CBL as an effective pedagogical method that enhances involvement, critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills among students. The instructors also reported that CBL contributed to the development of the students' confidence and motivation in communicating with others in English as well as their intercultural competence. However, the study highlights several challenges in using this method, including the amount of time and effort required to create appropriate scenarios, potential limitations in students' language proficiency, and the need for ongoing support for instructors to facilitate this method effectively. The study suggests that CBL is an effective approach to teaching English communication courses and recommends further support and resources for instructors to implement this approach successfully.

Keywords: case-based learning, critical thinking, communication course, EFL students

1. Introduction

The case-based learning (CBL) method has emerged as a popular alternative to traditional lecture-based instructional methods in many fields, including law, medicine, clinical health, and business (Marcus, Taylor, & Ellis, 2004; Williams, 2004). In this method, the instructor assigns students cases related to possible problems they may face in their future professions, and guides them in the analysis of these cases. The use of CBL in the classroom has the advantage of providing students with a collaborative setting to

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generate and discuss ideas, evaluate potential outcomes based on collective experience and knowledge, and encourage critical thinking, awareness, and empathy (Snyder & McWilliam, 1999). Thus, case-based learning is designed to prepare students for real-world problem-solving scenarios they are likely to encounter after graduation, helping them to develop the necessary skills and experiences for success in their chosen professions. To achieve these goals, case-based learning involves the creation of cases for educational purposes, which students explore interactively to discuss and debate issues dynamically.

Harvard Business School first introduced the case study method more than 70 years ago to teach postgraduate students how to analyze real or simulated business dilemmas, and since then, it has become widely used in business curricula around the world (Erskine, Leenders, & Mauffette-Leenders, 1998; Jennings, 1996). The method has been applied to various teaching areas, including civil engineering (Newson & Delatte, 2011), accounting (Doran, Healy, McCutcheon, & O'Callaghan, 2011), physical education (Richards, Hemphill, Templin, & Eubank, 2012), teacher training (Heitzmann, 2008), and language teaching (Jiménez Raya & Vieira, 2015; Kelch & Malupa-Kim, 2014). Despite the widespread use of CBL across various fields, its use in foreign language teaching, particularly in English, remains under-investigated. Thus, this study aims to contribute to the field by exploring the perceptions of the instructors who use the CBL method in their English communication skills course at a Vietnamese university.

2. Literature review

Several studies concur that the CBL method has numerous benefits, including the practical application of theoretical knowledge to real-life contexts, the enhancement of critical reasoning skills, and the development of self-awareness and reflective practice (Hemphill, Richards, Gaudreault, & Templin, 2015; Lee, Lee, Liu, Bonk, & Magjuka, 2009; Merseth, 1999; Rovegno & Dolly, 2006; Williams, 2004). CBL enables students to integrate their previous experiences in analyzing cases and developing solutions, thereby strengthening their analytical reasoning and problem-solving abilities (Carlson & Schodt, 1995; Harrington & Garrison, 1992). Furthermore, CBL functions as a bridge between knowledge acquired from previous learning experiences and its practical application (Veal & Taylor, 1995). Finally, CBL provides a safe environment for students to learn from the actions of characters portrayed in cases without the adverse consequences of making mistakes in the real world.

Previous studies reported that students perceive CBL as a highly effective and useful teaching method. Kleinfeld's (1992) study revealed that students had positive attitudes towards case study lessons, although there was no significant difference between student attitudes towards case studies and other teaching methods. Applying CBL to an economic theory course, Carlson and Schodt's (1995) study showed that students had a positive perception towards the cases, describing them as a beneficial

contributor to their learning. In Beck's (2007) study, all students regarded CBL as helpful or very helpful.

Although there is a wealth of research on students' experiences with CBL, limited research examines lecturers' perceptions of this method. Jackson's (2004) study focused on business professors in Hong Kong and their views on the value of CBL, the ways in which they utilized cases in their courses, challenges encountered when using cases, their capabilities as case leaders and their perception of their students' language requirements. Though the interviewed professors believed in the benefits of CBL, they were distressed by their student's reluctance to participate in discussions on the cases provided. They offered potential reasons for this issue subject to comparison with student responses during the next phase of the research. The outcomes implied the necessity for culturally specific training sessions on case methodology for both students and case leaders. Conducting research of this nature has the potential to encourage cooperation between ESP specialists and subject teachers and enhance the content, as well as the language support classes. Esteban and Canado's (2004) research delved into how business English teachers can overcome inherent limitations of CBL in the context of Business English. The paper recommended practices such as a teacher's adequate preparation, course syllabus suitability, students' motivation, authenticity of materials, learners' involvement in activities, as well as the appropriateness of the assessment measures and objectives achieved in the case as key factors for the success of the CBL method.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants and setting

The participants in this study were three female EFL instructors at a Vietnamese university who had over 20 year of teaching experience. These instructors implemented the CBL method in an English communication course, which was a component of the program on English Language Studies, with the aim of engaging students in critical thinking and developing their communication skills. Using the case writing process outlined in the guide by Harvard Graduate School of Education, they carefully considered the backgrounds, future professions, academic strengths and weaknesses of the potentially enrolled students in preparing communication scenarios and case support materials such as accompanying questions and evaluation criteria before the semester began. The instructors employed various CBL class activities, which included small and whole group discussions, role plays, simulations, and problem-solving presentations. They utilized a list of cases to teach in the English communication course that spanned a 15-week semester and consisted of a 110-minute session once a week.

3.3. Data collection

This qualitative study employed multiple data collection methods, including the analysis of teaching materials, teaching journals, and conducting interviews with the instructors.

The instructors were required to provide copies of their course description, cases, case support materials for the study and their teaching journals. The teaching materials and journals were meticulously analysed to identify the strategies employed by the instructors in using cases, their implementation of class activities and the problems they might face. The interviews followed a semi-structured format that focused on their perceptions of the use of cases in the communication course, specific challenges they experienced in using cases, and adjustments made to teach using cases. The interviews, which lasted approximately one hour, were reflexive, allowing the instructors to share their viewpoints on other related topics about case-based teaching that they considered important. Additionally, the interview questions were sometimes modified during the interview to obtain a better understanding of the concerns that the instructors had voiced.

3.4. Data analysis and trustworthiness

This study employed inductive analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to identify themes from the interview data. The researchers used two independent coding schemes to analyze student responses from journals, reflective reports, and interview transcripts to identify emerging themes. The two researchers then discussed their independent findings to develop a common set of themes, which are presented in the results section of the paper. NVivo 9.0 (QSR International, 2010), a qualitative data management tool, was used to organize and store the themes.

To enhance the credibility of the results, trustworthiness techniques were employed. Firstly, data were triangulated using multiple sources, including teaching materials, teaching journals, and conducting interviews. Secondly, researcher triangulation was established by having different researchers independently code and then discuss the data to create the final set of themes.

4. Findings and Discussion

The findings from the analysis of teaching materials, teaching journals, and interviews with instructors highlight that CBL is an effective teaching method that promotes deeper student engagement and critical thinking, which ultimately results in better language communication skills. This aligns with Esteban and Canado's (2004) ideas about the advantages of CBL in their study on business English teachers. Specifically, the findings indicate that CBL is a more effective teaching method than traditional lecture-based teaching methods. The instructors reported that CBL encourages students to engage more actively in the learning process, which leads to better language communication skills. The analysis of teaching journals further reveals that CBL-based teaching increases active participation from students, promoting engagement through discussion, debate, and collaborative problem-solving. This finding is corroborated by the following quotes from the instructors' journal entries:

"In today's CBL lesson, the students were asked to analyze a real-world case in pairs and then present their findings to the class. I was amazed at how engaged and enthusiastic they were during their presentations. Not only did they demonstrate a profound understanding of the material, but they also engaged in a lively debate about the best solution to the problem. I could see the students taking ownership of the learning process, and their desire to understand the content was obvious." (I1, L7)

"During today's session, the students engaged in a collaborative problem-solving task that required them to use their English communication skills in a real-life situation. The teamwork was exceptional, and I could see how students were learning from each other and building on their ideas. The discussion was lively, and many students expressed their viewpoints with conviction and clarity. CBL encourages active participation from students and fosters a supportive and collaborative learning environment that promotes communication and problem solving." (I2, L9)

"Today's CBL session was particularly inspiring. The students were enthusiastic and invested in the analysis of a compelling case. I noticed that they were asking questions more frequently and discussing different solutions, demonstrating a willingness to take risks and venture beyond their comfort zones. The CBL method has brought out the best in my students, and I'm continually impressed by their progress and desire to learn." (I3, L6)

The interview data also reveal the instructors' consistent idea that CBL can motivate and engage EFL students by providing them with engaging and relevant materials to analyze and discuss. By having a deeper understanding of real-world situations, EFL students may feel more enthusiastic about using their English communication skills as they see the potential practical application of their language learning.

The second important benefit of the CBL method admitted by the instructors is that it can foster critical thinking skills by providing EFL students with the opportunity to analyze real-world problems, develop strategies and solutions, and evaluate potential outcomes. The CBL activities can help students practice and refine the critical thinking skills necessary for success in their future professions. The instructors elaborated in their journals as follows:

"Using CBL today was a game-changer for our class. The students were able to analyze a real-world issue, formulate strategies and evaluate the potential outcomes. I noticed an increase in the students' critical thinking skills, they were able to identify essential details and evaluate potential implications. CBL can positively impact EFL students' critical thinking skills, which helps prepare them well for the jobs in the near future." (I1, L12)

"Students were given the task requiring them to analyze a real-life situation during today's CBL session. I was pleased to observe that the students broke the scenario down into parts

before proceeding to develop potential solutions. They also asked relevant questions, worked in groups and discussed trade-offs for each solution. The process indicated a high level of critical thinking, which made me believe that the CBL method is an effective way of building students' critical thinking skills." (I2, L7)

"Today's CBL session was intense, and I noticed that the students were actively engaged in the analysis of the case given. Throughout the process, the students were required to research, analyze and develop optimal solutions. They demonstrated their ability to apply knowledge to solve problems, revise solutions and communicate their thought process. The experience has convinced me that CBL can have a significant impact on developing students' critical thinking skills, thus preparing them for future success." (I3, L11)

The third advantage pointed out by the instructors is that CBL can help EFL students develop their communication skills as well as their confidence and motivation in communicating with others in English by requiring them to engage in in-depth discussions and present their findings to the class. These activities can provide EFL students with opportunities to practice conversation, negotiate meaning, and express their ideas in English. The following journal entries can clearly show the instructors' thought about this advantage:

"Today's CBL lesson was a great success in terms of fostering communication skills. Students worked in groups, engaged in discussion and presented their findings to the class. The process allowed the students to practice conversation, negotiate meaning, and express their ideas in English. CBL is an excellent tool for providing EFL students with opportunities to develop and enhance their communication skills and confidence." (I1, L3)

"During today's CBL session, the students had the opportunity to analyze a real-life situation and present their findings to the class. The session was heavily communication-oriented, and students engaged in discussion throughout. I noticed that the students worked on sentence structure, vocabulary, and pronunciation as they presented their findings. CBL actually increases EFL students' confidence in expressing their ideas in English in a supportive environment." (I2, L6)

"Throughout the CBL session today, the students were required to work in groups to analyze a real-life situation and present their findings to the class. I was impressed with how engaged they were during the discussion, negotiating meaning and expressing their thoughts in English. The session provided ample opportunities for students to practice and refine their communication skills, which are vital for their success in the future. CBL enhances EFL students' language proficiency while promoting an interactive and participatory learning environment." (I3, L4)

The instructors' experiences are in line with Grosse's (1988) observation that case-based learning promotes an integrated skills approach to language teaching, offering students the chance to practice reading, speaking, listening, and writing. Small and large group discussions, role plays, simulations, and problem-solving tasks are widely used for teaching English communication skills. Because they focus on the analysis of real-life situations, these activities promote the development of critical reasoning skills. The CBL method, in particular, allows students to delve into complex situations, consider various ways of tackling a problem, and take appropriate action. Additionally, role plays and simulations offer opportunities for flexible and creative use of language, encouraging students to immerse themselves in the scenario and overlook their language constraints.

Another benefit of using the CBL method that the instructors mentioned in the interviews relates to the development of students' intercultural competence. According to them, CBL can provide EFL students with opportunities to discuss and assess the perspectives of people from different cultural backgrounds when analyzing culture-related cases. This allows them to develop intercultural competence by expanding their understanding of other cultures and their communication practices, thus creating a more tolerant and diverse global mindset.

Apart from the benefits, implementing the CBL method in a communication course for EFL students can present several challenges, according to the instructors. One of the main challenges is the amount of time and effort required to create appropriate scenarios or cases that allow students to apply their language skills in a meaningful way. Additionally, potential limitations in students' language proficiency may make it difficult for them to fully engage with the case and use the necessary language skills, that is, they may encounter difficulties comprehending the case details and participating in discussions, presenting additional challenges for the instructors to address. The instructors thus have to find the right balance between providing enough guidance and enabling independent student exploration. Finally, effective implementation of case-based learning requires ongoing support for instructors so that the instructors could have the necessary resources and training to lead effective discussions, provide feedback, and evaluate student progress, as the instructors in this study desired.

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings highlighted in this study, it is recommended that EFL instructors implement CBL as a teaching method in communication courses. CBL has been shown to be an effective method for promoting deeper student engagement, critical thinking, and better language communication skills. To maximize the benefits of CBL, EFL instructors need to create appropriate scenarios or cases that allow students to apply their language skills in a meaningful way. However, this may require a lot of effort and time, meaning that instructors need to plan in advance and keep the tasks manageable. Instructors may also need to provide additional support to students who struggle with certain aspects of the case. While CBL activities can provide valuable opportunities for EFL students to

develop critical thinking and communication skills, it is also essential to provide ongoing support for instructors to facilitate this method effectively. This support may include training and resources. By effectively implementing CBL, EFL instructors can create a more engaging and effective learning environment that promotes students' critical thinking and communication skills in English.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the instructors' perceptions of the CBL method used in the communication course for EFL students were mostly positive. CBL is considered as an effective method for promoting student engagement, confidence, critical thinking, language communication skills and intercultural competence among EFL students. Despite the challenges such as time-consuming case writing and students' limited language proficiency, the benefits of using CBL far outweigh these challenges. By incorporating CBL into their teaching practice, EFL instructors can create an engaging and effective learning environment and provide their students with opportunities to improve their language skills and critical thinking, as well as deepen their understanding of cultures and the world around them in a meaningful way.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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