

‘The Language of Business Cases’ - An Interdisciplinary Approach to Teaching Language at HKUST

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ABSTRACT

Business Studies (SBM) students are required to read and analyze Case Studies from their first year at the university. Faculty throughout the School of Business and Management (ISMT, ECON, MGTO, MARK, ACCT, FINA) often require students to read and produce written analyses of cases specific to the courses being taught. Indeed, cases may range from a simple one-page content-related article to a 20+ page Harvard Business Case often used in internationally recognized MBA programs. Due to the linguistic demands of such texts, therefore, it is not surprising that L2 students often experience a considerable amount of difficulty in coping with the reading and writing tasks set for them in content-related courses. Reading for specific information, understanding subtle linguistic clues, extrapolating and synthesizing essential facts for use in academic writing are just a few of the areas where students need more communication skills support.

Case studies provide students with a unique opportunity to read, discuss and explore various situations that involve ‘real life’ language presented within specific situational contexts. Each case is compelling in nature as it involves a specific dilemma that requires the learners to be actively engaged in all aspects of communication skills including discussions, debates and negotiations. Through the use of Case Studies, students can further develop their analytical and problem solving skills while improving their linguistic fluency, proficiency and self-confidence.

*The ‘Language of Case Studies’ adopts elements of Problem-Based Learning with regard to its pedagogic approach as tasks and activities are designed to build upon each other as the learner progresses. It also follows a systematic step-by-step approach to Case Analysis that is closely related to specific language acquisition aims and objectives. Overall, the course has been designed in such a way that the **integrations of both analytical and communication skills occur simultaneously**. The face-to-face classroom sessions will be used mainly for oral skills development and practice; whereas the reading and writing tasks will be mainly reserved for homework which will be accessible via a course website. The course website will not only contain essential reading and writing tasks for classroom use, but it will also present relevant and timely reference materials, visual learning cues to reinforce skills and an online student portfolio where students can collect their work. Each major unit will conclude with a*

formal assessment. These assessments are designed as a combination of individual and group tasks which cover all four language development skills.

At the moment, the trial course is being taught in several Language Center classes for Y.1 SBM students. The qualitative feedback that has been collected thus far from both teachers and students has been very positive and encouraging. These initial findings will be presented and discussed as the basis for further revision of the course materials.

Keywords

Language & business case studies, case analysis & language

WHY USE CASE STUDIES IN LANGUAGE CLASSES?

Business students (SBM) are required to read and analyze Case Studies from their first year at the university. Faculty throughout the School of Business and Management (ISMT, ECON, MGTO, MARK, ACCT, FINA) often require students to read and produce written analyses of cases specific to their subject areas. Indeed, cases may range from a simple one-page content-related article to a 20+ page Harvard Business Case often used in internationally recognized MBA programs. Due to the linguistic demands of such texts, therefore, it is not surprising that L2 students often experience a considerable amount of difficulty in coping with the reading and writing tasks set for them in content-related courses. Reading for specific information, understanding subtle linguistic clues, extrapolating and synthesizing essential facts for use in academic writing are just a few of the areas where students need more communication skills support.

Case studies provide students with a unique opportunity to read, discuss and explore various situations that involve ‘real-life’ language presented within specific situational contexts. In *Case Studies in International Management*, Christopher Sawyer-Laucanno points out the inherent value of using case studies in the classroom because ‘It involves the participants in actual problem-solving, a process that is a major part of managerial practice’ (1987, ix). In this particular book, short texts that focus on a salient managerial dilemma in a specific company are followed by a number of exhibits and documents that serve to ‘build’ the case. These cases are then arranged from simple to complex in terms of both language as well as content. For the second language learner, approaches such as these are helpful as the texts are delivered in manageable ‘chunks’ which can be more easily digested and understood. Each case is also compelling in nature as it involves the type of dilemma that requires learners to be actively engaged in all aspects of communication skills including discussions, debates and negotiations. Through the use of Case Studies, therefore, students can further develop their analytical and problem-solving skills while improving their linguistic fluency, proficiency and self-confidence.

PEDAGOGIC FRAMEWORK

The ‘Language of Business Cases’ adopts elements of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) (Stinson, 1993, Savery & Duffy, 1999, Van Kleef & Perkins, 2000) and the Case Analysis Approach (Easton, 1992, Marzano et al, 1999) with regard to its pedagogic approach as tasks and activities are designed to build upon each other as the learner progresses. Aspects of the PBL framework have been adopted as part of the theoretical underpinning of materials design and implementation for the new course as it encourages more deep and memorable learning through the problem-solving process. As Savery & Duffy point out: ‘The facilitator assumes a major role in modeling the metacognitive thinking associated with the problem solving process. Hence this is a cognitive apprenticeship environment with scaffolding designed to support the learner in developing the metacognitive skills.’ (1999: 9) Within this framework, then, learners are exposed to higher-level linguistic and analytical skills development as they delve deeper into the central dilemma of each case.

In addition to aspects of a PBL framework, the course also follows a systematic step-by-step approach to Case Analysis as outlined by Easton (1992) in *Learning from Case Studies*. The steps involved in the process guide the learner from the superficial (the text) to the more in-depth (the meaning beyond the text).

1. Understanding the situation
2. Diagnosing problem areas
3. Generating alternative solutions
4. Predicting outcomes
5. Choosing among alternatives
6. Rounding out the analysis
7. Communicating the results (oral and written assessments)

(see Appendix 1)

This systematic approach helps the learner to move through each case by first reading and discussing the various texts, and then moving on to a more in-depth analysis of the salient complex business-related issues contained within the case. Although the approach is based upon the study of cases from a content perspective, (i.e., Business and Management Studies) the level of analysis at each stage is very useful in providing a clear framework for the ensuing language tasks that must be carried out. In other words, you must read deeply in order to ‘Understand the situation’ (step 1), and you must analyze the text effectively in order to ‘Diagnose the problem areas’ (step 2), and so on. The process of moving from the general to the specific, from the macro to the micro level is, of course, closely related to the course’s specific language acquisition aims and objectives (see Appendix 2). The careful weaving of content and language, therefore, highly promotes the integration of both analytical and communication skills.

TEACHING AND CLASSROOM IMPLEMENTATION

The face-to-face classroom sessions are used mainly for oral skills development and

practice, whereas the reading and writing tasks are mainly reserved for homework which is accessible via a course website. The course website not only contains essential reading and writing tasks for classroom use, but also presents relevant and timely reference materials, visual learning cues (video sequences, graphics etc.) to reinforce skills and an online student portfolio where each student can collect his or her work. Each major unit concludes with two formal assessments that involve both oral and written tasks. These assessments are designed as a combination of individual and group work that covers all four language development skills.

The course has been piloted in several sections of the Language Center's spring SBM Y.1 course so that revisions and adaptations can be made before it is offered to all 700 Y.1 SBM students in the spring of 2005. So far, qualitative feedback collected from both teachers and students has been very positive and encouraging (see Appendix 3). The students have said that by taking the new Language of Business Cases course, they can now see the obvious links between language and content-based information, and how this will be useful in both their academic studies and their future careers. They also appreciate the fact that they are being given ample opportunities to develop their critical thinking and analytical skills at the same time that they are becoming more linguistically proficient.

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APPENDIX 1

Easton's step-by-step approach to learning from case studies

1. Understanding the situation

- *Become familiar with information in the case by reading*
- *Organize information to help you gain understanding*
- *Evaluate the information – validity, relevance*
- *Build a descriptive, qualitative model of the situation*

2. Diagnosing problem areas

- *Uncover the differences between what is (or will be) and what we would like the situation to be in the case situation (identify problems)*
- *Identify what is (or will be) wrong with what is happening in the organization*
- *State problems clearly and relate them to each other*
- *Prioritize problem/s and be able to justify*

3. Generating alternative solutions

- *Create alternative solutions to the problems identified in step 2*
- *Examine major strategic alternatives first*
- *Examine tactical alternatives*

4. Predicting outcomes

- *Predict what would happen if a particular solution were put into action*
- *Try to predict most of the possible and plausible outcomes*
- *Try to assess the likelihood of a particular outcome*

5. Choosing among alternatives

- *Choose among the alternative solutions identified in step 2*
- *List the pros and cons for each alternative*
- *Make direct comparisons through elaboration, qualification and quantification (if necessary) to help make the choice*

6. Rounding out the analysis

- *Decide how much detail you wish to include in your analysis*
- *Make sure you understand what level of detail is required in your case analysis*
- *Consider implementation plans of your solution/s and contingency plans if necessary*

7. Communicating the results

- *Plan how to communicate the results of your case analysis*
- *Understand and aim to fulfill the requirements for both oral and written communication*

Adapted from: Easton, G. (1992). Learning from Case Studies (2nd ed.). New York: Prentice-Hall.

Appendix 2

Problem-Based Learning and the Case Analysis Approach – Integrating Language and Content

'PBL appears to be a very suitable model for the development of knowledge and skills belonging to certain professional competencies. It can therefore provide the language teacher with an opportunity to use practice situations and material, which the student may encounter in his future profession.' (Van Kleeef, A. and P. Perkins, (2000) *Teaching Modern Foreign Languages using Problem-Based Learning*).

<u>PBL & Case Analysis (PBL & CA)</u>	<u>Language Learning Objectives</u>	<u>Developing Critical Thinking Skills</u>
Step 1: Meeting the problem (PBL) <i>Understanding the situation (CA)</i>	Reading for information (reading strategies); listening for information (listening strategies); understanding content; drawing inferences; identifying argument/stance of writer; identifying problem.	Exposure to 'real-world' problems; Extrapolating skills (defining problems and setting goals); generating skills (inferring, predicting and elaborating).
Step 2: Separation of known facts from unknown facts (PBL) <i>Research and fact-finding (CA)</i>	Group discussion: **Structure; Content/Critical Thinking; Interaction; Delivery; answering questions: 'what do we know?' – 'what do we need to know?' – what are we going to do?'; identifying learning objectives.	Focusing skills (defining problems and setting goals); generating skills (inferring, predicting and elaborating).
Step 3: Individual research <i>Diagnosing problem areas (CA)</i>	Division of labour: deciding research roles among the group; reading for information; establishing relevance; drawing inferences; reaching (individual) conclusions; preparing to report to group.	Information gathering skills (observing and formulating questions); generating skills (inferring, predicting and elaborating); organizational skills (comparing, classifying, ordering and representing).

<p>Step 4: Group analysis</p>	<p>Group discussion: **Structure; Content/Critical Thinking; Interaction; Delivery; communicating individual research; exchanging information; evaluating research results (establishing need for further research, if necessary).</p>	<p>Recalling skills (encoding and recalling information); analytical skills (identifying attributes and components, identifying relationships and patterns, identifying main ideas and identifying errors); synthesizing.</p>
<p>Step 5: Solution generation <i>Generating alternative solutions (CA)</i></p>	<p>Group discussion: **Structure; Content/Critical Thinking; Interaction; Delivery; relating original problem to information from research; generating solutions; choosing most viable solution.</p>	<p>Generating skills (inferring, predicting and elaborating); integrating skills (summarizing and restructuring); synthesizing.</p>
<p>Step 6: Solution presentation <i>Predicting outcomes and choosing among alternatives (CA)</i></p>	<p>Presentation of solution to an audience: Individual/group report: developing an argument in written form; giving reasons for defending or opposing a point of view; giving advantages/disadvantages of options; justifying solution. Oral presentation: presenting argument to live audience; giving reasons for defending or opposing a point of view; giving advantages/disadvantages of options; justifying solution; answering questions from audience.</p>	<p>Integrating skills (summarizing and restructuring) Presenting an argument in written/spoken form; synthesizing.</p>
<p>Step 7: Evaluation <i>Rounding out the analysis and communicating the results (CA)</i></p>	<p>Self/peer evaluation by students of: self-directed learning; problem-solving skills; skills as a group member; solution viability. Students may be asked to provide a portfolio documenting their learning through the course, containing responses to a series of language tasks and a reflection of individual learning.</p>	<p>Evaluating skills (establishing criteria and verifying)</p>

Appendix 3

Samples of Y.1 SBM Student Feedback on Pilot Course – Spring, 2004

Note: The feedback instrument focused on specific aspects of the course as follows:
- The Process, The Materials, The Activities, The Learning and Further Comments and/or Suggestions

The Language of Business Cases

#1. (Exchange Student - L2 English Speaking Student)

‘I think this new approach has been extremely successful. It has been not only fun but also challenging. It has been interesting to discover how big a difference some words make in the way other people interpret and understand our message...I have learned a lot both when it comes to case analysis, but also when it comes to English.’

#2. (Local - L1 English Speaking Student)

‘In terms of English, it was a very balanced approach, incorporating reading, writing, oral and listening skills. It was definitely more effective than comprehension exercises that we, local students, are used to because it forces us to read between the lines.’

#3. (Local – L2 English Speaking Student)

‘As for English, we spoke more and got a lot of chances to discuss the issue with the case study. We could also share our ideas and thoughts in the process. I learned much from my classmates. That was invaluable.’

#4. (Local – L2 English Speaking Student)

‘All in all, the case study approach is an innovative way of learning and certainly added more colors to the course.’