Putting Language Before Business: The Business Case Study in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract: *Practitioners in both English as a Second Language (ESL) and Foreign Language instruction praise business case studies for their real-world application and their ability to stimulate discussion and meaningful writing assignments. However, language teachers face a major challenge in guiding the unpredictable nature of such discussions, while students struggle with the foreign language as well as the business concepts of the case. This article explains how language activities can become the key objectives of the foreign language or ESL lesson based on the case study. By developing a lesson plan focused on language functions and speech events, the language instructor directs learning away from business concepts toward business communication skills. Such a language-based framework also provides the structure required to establish and achieve specific learning objectives.*

Introduction

With the increasing maturity of curricula, business language courses today use a plethora of authentic teaching materials, including texts originally intended for business and business instruction. One such text type, the business case study, ranks high in popularity because of its ability to stimulate discussion and its perceived relevance to the real world. While the business education course utilizes such case studies to develop analytical thinking and problem solving skills and/or to illustrate a technical point, the business language course can and should pursue other strategies: Its focus is on the underlying language activities. The teaching of business concepts remains in the hands of the business faculty; language faculty develop business communication skills.

At times, the acquisition of technical terms and jargon represents the primary learning activity of the business-language lesson. The vocabulary, however, is not "the only aspect of the linguistic system that students need to improve upon" (Chen 1988, 219). Many other productive activities employ higher-order thinking skills requiring advanced language structures. Such language functions (e.g., explaining, criticizing, and making suggestions) tend to occur naturally in the discussion of a case in the guise of various speech events — the report, the business letter, the oral presentation.[1] Schröder (1988) reminds us that in languages for special purposes, the purpose and the language cannot be separated (26). Language functions such as defining, explaining, and generalizing are integral components of business communication, and case studies provide an excellent vehicle for the practice of these communication skills.

Why Use Case Studies?

The literature confirms that potential employers seek practical language skills from job applicants. Bolten's (1994) survey in Germany and de Fontenay's (1995) survey in Canada among

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potential employers demonstrate the need for specific abilities. Providing and presenting information, participating in meetings, speaking publicly, negotiating with clients, and drafting letters and memos all take top spots on the list of professional competencies desired in the area of business language.

Similarly, participants in a business language course clearly seek the same type of practical skills for real-life application (Arndt et al. 1990). Language activities typically applied to case studies do indeed address these very skills, and cases remain popular with students and teachers alike due to their ability to motivate and stimulate discussion. To assure success in conversation activities, Harper and Lively (1987) stipulate that content is "required for conversation, a source of ideas and opinions" (337) and specify that controversy among students is "acceptable and even encouraged since disagreement makes people want to talk" (338). The business case study fits the bill: It allows for learner-centered instruction (Valdivieso 1992, 26) and lets students take differing positions on an issue and defend their opinions (Federico and Moore 1998, 136).

Numerous practitioners in both English as a Second Language (ESL) and Foreign Language instruction praise the usefulness of case studies, their real-world applications, and their ability to stimulate discussion and meaningful writing assignments (e.g., Piotrowski 1982; Grosse 1988; Westerfield 1989; Casagrande 1998). Loughrin-Sacco and Fronmueller (1998) emphasize the opportunity to practice various speech acts, including questions, summary, analysis, comparison, and hypothesis (154). However, they stop short of making these the primary purpose of using case studies in the business language course.

This article, then, demonstrates that all these language activities are not just convenient by-products but, in fact, the key objectives of the foreign language (or ESL) lesson plan based on the case study.

Creating Structure

In her assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of case studies for the language class, Uber Grosse (1988) focuses on the role of the instructor and his or her difficulty in guiding discussions in the absence of related language exercises and activities. She cautions that lesson planning "can be a major challenge, given the often loosely structured and somewhat unpredictable nature of case discussions" (134). One way to handle the unpredictable flow is the creation of language activities based on communication needs relevant to the situation in the case and in its cultural content.

Borgulya (1993) proposes a small number of relatively stable components of a business language curriculum: a minimum standard vocabulary, relevant speech acts, and specific subject matter (207). In order to make the specialized vocabulary accessible to students, the instructor can provide vocabulary lists for items that students should learn and retain for active use. Such lists are not always necessary though, because vocabulary items appear in context;[2] however, for a long case a list helps prioritize vocabulary for students, who prefer to know what they need to master. Alternatively students can, in the course of working with the case study, develop their own vocabulary lists. Heinemann (1994) points out in his discussion of *Börsenberichte* (stock market reports) for business German that such lists do not exceed the length of a list required for introducing any intermediate-level reading selection (53) and suggests that students can easily build on vocabulary acquired previously as long as they are made aware of special usage.

To ensure that learners engage in relevant speech acts, predetermined and guided activities — not freeflow discussions — fashion the core of language activities. Baldegger et al.'s (1980) *Kontaktschwelle Deutsch als Fremdsprache* provides an excellent and comprehensive list of functions, notions, and grammatical structures. Many language textbooks today use language functions as a primary organizational principle. Some that have particular relevance to business language include expressing opinions; agreeing and disagreeing; clarifying; defining; stating problems, solutions, and conclusions; listing and comparing options; and hypothesizing and conceding (Beedham and Charles 1989; Scholtes-Schmid 1986). The author recommends explaining explicitly to learners the use and purpose of these language functions. A global discussion of a topic will elicit many language functions seemingly automatically and in a natural context; however, learning benefits increase with the students' awareness and involvement in the learning process. Furthermore, familiarity with different speech events (presentation, meeting, brainstorming, and so forth) and their corresponding speech acts as well as use of appropriate language tools for their execution add up to the valuable "soft skills" necessary for many careers, including adeptness at communication, organization, and teamwork.

Initial Reading of the Case

All students must first read the case and arrive at a common minimal level of comprehension of the key issues. Some language activities remain so fundamental that they apply to any case study: first, a retelling of the case in some detail (possibly in varying verb tenses, using direct and indirect speech) and then a brief summary, including only the most important points (e.g., terse references such as "According to the CEO, …" will now replace indirect speech.)[3] At this point, vocabulary and terminology need attention. For a preliminary exercise, Margold (1985) suggests that students locate all definitions contained in the text (51). Students then can embark on writing their own

definitions of important terms as well as other basic activities, such as preparing a brief chronology of events, creating job descriptions of characters, and explaining any illustrations contained in the case. Each one of these exercises contains a potential language lesson, ranging from a study of formal definitions to the correct use of the different past tenses and the very specialized expressions usually required for charts and graphs.[4]

Planning

Only apparently contradicting the assertion made earlier that case studies permit learner-centered lessons, the instructor needs to provide much guidance and direction in order to allow for meaningful discussions and relevant outcomes. Initially, the instructor must determine how much class time to allow for the case study and which language skills need work (for instance, writing vs. speaking; hypothetical discussion using subjunctive verb forms vs. factual narration using indicative). To assist students in the process of identifying and performing meaningful activities, the instructor must also preplan activities, precisely in order to avoid the unstructured discussions that are so typical for cases. The literature on the case method as used for business instruction does not advise the instructor to do nothing while students discuss the case. The teacher must facilitate the classroom procedure and ensure that the students' experience with the case is meaningful (Erskine et al. 1981, 16).

Ideas for discussion topics will come to mind quite easily, albeit usually out of context, for example: "Students could compare and contrast the way in which employees in the United States can be fired on the spot versus the German approach, which makes it difficult to dismiss employees from their jobs." The point here is to provide structure. First of all, the activities must fit into the general syllabus and secondly, exercises should vary with every case or text: sometimes oral, sometimes written, at times formal (with CEO and high-level customers), at other times informal (among colleagues). Naturally, the case must logically support the activities so that the most meaningful starting point often rests within the content or subject matter. The language instructor should select concepts from business and culture that pertain to the syllabus and to the interests of the class, not necessarily the key question posed by the case (see "Content," below).

Based on the content issues selected, the initial outline should address language functions, speech events, and issues pertaining to business communication. A particular function, such as giving instructions to a co-worker, usually needs practice before its application to the case. Similarly, pertinent grammatical structures may require review. Instructions, for example, can be realized by various means, including commands, suggestions, and questions. One of the characteristics that make Language for a Special Purpose courses popular arises from the fact that grammatical features assume a clear relationship to the content of the message.

A discussion of speech events presents an ideal medium for the integration of language and business, a necessary step in transforming the business-language class into a foreign-language, business-communication course. This can include fundamental issues of communication (does a particular situation require written communication or will a phone call suffice?) and of cultural concerns (how is a meeting in Germany different than in the United States in terms of agenda, seating arrangements, and so forth?) as well as an analysis of appropriate language tools. Negotiations with business partners, for instance, necessitate firm but formal and polite language, and most likely subjunctive verb forms; formal presentations will make use of passive verb forms and other impersonal constructions.[5]

Choosing Tasks

Students can and should play an active role in the actual choice of activities. By considering the need for obtaining additional information, for assembling and analyzing data, and for communicating with other players in the case, students are able to present ideas, which the instructor then channels into assignments that correspond to language functions identified in the planning stage. Many activities can be adapted to the case study in the form of role-playing. Because such activities build on the scenario at hand, they seem more meaningful and arise from the context rather than the syllabus that dictates that a particular lesson is due. Role-playing based on a case study gives rise to telephone calls and business correspondence much more naturally than a lesson entitled "Speaking on the Telephone" or "The Business Letter." Discussions of differences in register,[6] degrees of politeness (e.g., the use of last names vs. first names), and oral versus written expression form a natural addition to such lessons. Business communication (beyond business language) addresses issues such as public speaking, body language, designing and using visuals, as well as research and report writing.[7]

Content

Language instructors might initially feel apprehensive about having to explain the business concepts involved in the case study. When the participants do not understand the basic issues, language activities surrounding the case may seem meaningless. Possibly students in the course, teaching assistants, and colleagues in the business departments can assist by providing explanations and guidance. Numerous case studies exist, however, that focus on a fundamental or general business issue, such as the example *Silica Glass* below, and many if not most cases come with a teaching note or an instructor's guide. "While it is true that the role of the instructor is not to teach business con-

tent of a course but rather to act as a consultant on language matters" (Westerfield 1989, 76), the language instructor should feel comfortable enough with the case to pose relevant questions and keep the discussion going (Piotrowski 1982, 235).

Culture forms an integral component of the language course, including history and geography, the educational system, professions and industries predominant in the target culture, sociopolitical issues and other philosophical concepts, such as prevailing attitudes towards business, money and the government. The language teacher can also draw on numerous works on cross-cultural communication, including some prepared specifically with language issues in mind (e.g., Victor 1992) and many others intended for the international manager (e.g., Harris and Moran 1991; Hall 1989; Hofstede 1984; Terpstra and David 1985).

In addition, any case study will suggest a variety of concepts related specifically to the world of business and economics. Here the business language instructor needs to exercise discretion. Some features fit easily into the purview of the business language course and pose no excessive difficulty in terms of comprehension. These include the common functional areas,[8] ownership structures of firms, mission and vision of an enterprise, employment practices, and the ever-popular realm of advertising. Qualifications and interests of individual instructors and their classes will dictate the further exploration of business concepts. Team-teaching with colleagues from the business areas, trailer courses, and guest speakers may present viable options. However, language instructors should not feel pressured to become teachers of business.

A Sample Lesson Plan: *Silica Glass, Inc.*

Silica Glass, Inc., a case available in German from the Thunderbird case series,[9] will help illustrate the numerous options open to language classes beyond vocabulary acquisition and global discussion. A brief summary of the case follows.

Silica Glass, Inc. describes the dilemma of a glass manufacturer needing to expand while at the same time wanting to check its competitors. Sonnenberg Glaswerke GmbH in the former East Germany represents a possible target for takeover, thus serving dual purposes: elimination of a competitor as well as acquisition of the facilities needed for expansion. In the year 1991, however, many questions regarding ownership of land and production facilities in the new German states remain; besides, the current employees and managers of Sonnenberg have their own ideas for the future of "their" company. The case narrative closes with the Silica negotiator leaving the United States once more for Thuringia, Germany.

Lesson Plan

Lesson plan developed by instructor for three class periods of 60 to 75 minutes each for an advanced business German course:

Content: Focus on economic changes because of unification, unemployment, transition to market economy, problems with ownership, attitude toward job security. (For this lesson, disregard other topics, such as the European Union, the glass fiber business, costs of the acquisition, etc.)

Language functions: (1) presenting factual information; (2) comparing and contrasting data and viewpoints (related function: stating advantages and disadvantages); (3) dealing with opposing viewpoints and objections.

Possible topics:

- Market economy vs. planned economy
- American vs. German attitudes towards job security, firing
- Unemployment before and after unification
- Private ownership vs. *Volkseigentum* (people's property)
- Profitability/capitalism vs. social welfare

Speech events: (1) brief oral presentation to representatives of Silica Glass management; (2) meeting between German and American managers intended to clarify some of the cultural differences.

Business communication: research of current economic data; preparing effective visuals (overheads) for the presentations, including one graph or chart; citing sources and references.

First Class Period

(Students have read the case and are bringing three comprehension check questions to class.)

1. Answer important vocabulary and content questions. If desired or necessary, conduct a brief question/answer session as comprehension check.
2. Divide students into small groups for the following assignments (15–20 minutes). Different groups can work on the same topics:
   - Narrate the events in first person singular from the point-of-view of the American negotiators (use past tense).
   - Narrate the events in first person plural from the point-of-view of the German managers (use past tense).
   - Prepare a concise, formal summary of salient information and the current status of the project for a meeting of high-level management (use third person). (The report from this group would provide a good opening for the next class period.)
3. Ask for representatives from different groups to report/read aloud. Limit speaking time per person to

four to five minutes (15 minutes total). Discuss the differences in the narrations based on the differing viewpoints; discuss the structure of narration and summary; discuss the use of the different past tenses.

4. Students brainstorm: What information about the German economy, the changes in East Germany, the German mentality about jobs and work, and so forth do the Americans need in order to negotiate with the Germans? (Students should come up with several topics, which will resemble the list prepared by the instructor beforehand.) Assign topics to groups of two to three students for research and oral presentation; not all students need to participate.

Second Class Period

1. Presentations (formal summary of case; three presentations, each 8–10 minutes)
2. Review expressions useful to compare and contrast and to describe (dis)advantages; discuss (dis)advantages of the opposing concepts presented.
3. Discuss criteria for effective presentations. Brainstorm on research techniques, preparing outlines for presentations and visual aids.
4. Discuss the structure of business meetings using the situation at hand: The two sides have agreed to more talks, specifically wanting to clear up some of the differences in understanding certain cultural and business concepts and how these might be addressed. The whole class may want to prepare a common agenda: greetings, expressing willingness to negotiate, explaining differences on certain topics, and so forth.

Third Class Period

1. Students divide into groups of four, assuming the roles of German and American managers. Using the information from the oral presentations and the agenda, groups conduct meetings. Reminder: Use polite, formal language even when disagreeing (time limit: 20–30 minutes).
2. Provide closure by letting the participants express their ideas, opinions, and solutions in a global discussion with minimal guidance from instructor. If possible, provide examples of other acquisitions that did take place and their success. Summarize learning experiences in the areas of business, language, and culture.[10]
3. Homework assignment: Write a two-paragraph article for the Sonnenberg company newspaper about the project and/or additional research and written reports.

More options surely exist, but any given language class does not have to cover all the possibilities. The list of activities provided here does perhaps indicate the wealth of language activities hidden in a case study, along with numerous possibilities for addressing culture and business topics — all without necessarily having to "solve" the business problem posed by the case.

Conclusion

Locating case studies in the appropriate foreign language may require some sleuthing. Teaching with cases is characteristic for business education in some cultures more so than in others; however, a number of business textbooks include case studies. The Internet, colleagues in other departments, and professional organizations can provide additional leads.[11] Articles in business journals may constitute excellent case-study material in the target language even if not designed as case studies. If cases are available in languages other than the one desired, the instructor may choose to prepare a brief summary of the case in the target language for use by the language students with proper permission from the copyright owner (usually not the author).[12]

All this work does pay off. Case studies work especially well with business practitioners and executives because they can use language and patterns of thought that they know from their work environment. Cases let them be themselves and have for that reason been successfully used in the teaching of English as a Second Language (Piotrowski 1982). But cases also work with students of language who may not yet know the thought and speech patterns common to the world of business. They actually allow these students to recognize and develop such patterns, provided that the language instructor points them out. Such competence proves valuable in the business domain, and instructors of business language can brush up on these at numerous seminars and conferences. It seems more than appropriate to pass this expertise on to our students. The communication skills (writing, oral presentation, etc.) will also transfer to the native language and can help performance in the business course and on the job.

Notes

1. The following three terms appear repeatedly in this paper:

   (a) "Language function" refers to a particular purpose, such as eliciting information, agreeing and disagreeing, or making suggestions. Each function can in turn be realized with various language structures; for example, eliciting information can take the shape of a question or a command, among other possibilities.

   (b) "Speech event" is the situation or setting in which language occurs, for instance a meeting, a business lunch, or a discussion with a colleague.

   (c) "Speech act" is used here to denote any utterance of language, not as a term representing a particular theory.

2. In the case of terminology associated with a particular dis-

cipline, the use of authentic materials, that is, case studies, provides an additional benefit: The language instructor (or the author of teaching materials) does not have to decide which words to include or which key words to test. The context guides the selection: Rather than arbitrarily learning 100 words that seem to be related to the stock market, for example, learners use vocabulary needed to discuss the pros and cons of a company going public.

3. I have found that students often do not distinguish a brief summaryfrom a lengthier narration and that some have developed a habit of quoting speakers using direct speech: "The manager said, 'I have no time'" instead of "The manager indicated that she had no time."

4. Prepositions, for example, present challenges in most languages: *Prices rose by 10%, from 50 to 55.*

5. This necessary correlation of language level and business content precludes, in the opinion of the author, the teaching of business communication in first-year language classes. While vocabulary and subject matter from the world of business have their place in the first-year course and provide additional interest, true business communication requires more advanced fluency.

6. Communication with a co-worker may have a conversational tone, while the same information presented to a customer or superior will take a different linguistic shape.

7. This is one area where the business language course can truly become a business communications course with the addition of topics beyond basic business correspondence, such as library research, preparing citations and a bibliography, using business databases, creating graphs and charts, and making oral presentations.

8. Common functional areas include accounting, finance, marketing, personnel, research and development, and production.

9. The Thunderbird Case Series can be accessed via the Thunderbird homepage: www.t-bird.edu.

10. This particular case has no clean-cut "solution": The deal between Silica Glass, Inc. and the Sonnenberg Glaswerke GmbH fell through.

11. Two cases from the Thunderbird series are available in German: *Silica Glass, Inc.* and *Zapa Chemical and BuBa*. For French, a textbook is available: Salvatore Federico and Catherine Moore. 1997. *Cas Pratiques pour le Français des Affaires*. 2nd Ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.

12. Most published case studies, including the Thunderbird, Harvard, and Dartmouth case series, are copyrighted. Photocopying is not permitted; each student must buy a copy (typical cost is $3–$5). The institutions named here enforce their copyright strictly and will take legal action if any infringement becomes known. Preparing translations and summaries can be considered "derivative work," which is usually an infringement of copyright unless permission is given.

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