

**Making a case for the case study approach
Improving the oral communication skills of EFL graduate students**

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Abstract

There are many sound pedagogical justifications for using the case study approach in an EFL program which prepares graduate students for full-time study in International Management and in International Relations. This paper reviews the literature regarding the use of case studies in language courses in an attempt to improve the case-based discussion component of an oral communications course. The author presents a critique of the case-based discussion unit which had been specifically developed to teach strategic classroom discussion skills and concepts in intercultural education. Based on the work of experienced practitioners in ESP and in MBA programs, recommendations for improvement are presented. Though the promises of case study are great, implementing it successfully proves to be very difficult.

*Key Words: case study, EFL, ESP, oral communications

1. The case study approach in ESP

1.1 The advantages of using the case study approach

The case study approach has been used successfully in language classes for many years (Rodgers, 1993; Valdivieso, 1992; Westerfield, 1989, 1987; Grosse, 1985; Charles, 1984; Piotrowski, 1982). The proponents of the case study method cite an impressive list of positive outcomes in a number of skill and knowledge areas. First, it helps to improve reading skills since being able to participate effectively in a case demands careful and thorough preparation. This generally involves 'critical reading' noting not only what is written, but also what is not specifically treated, i.e., factors or issues which may arise in the later case discussion. A conscientious student will probably read the material not just once, but may re-read them numerous times. "Since the instructor will insist upon an accurate restatement of case facts from the students, reading a case over, even ten times, is not an unwise use of time." (Piotrowski, 1982, p. 235)

Second, one of the major advantages touted by proponents is the fact that the case is generally a real life situation, and students become involved in practical decision making.

“... it sharpens the student’s ability to differentiate facts from opinions, relevant data from irrelevant, and trivial information from that which is vital to decision making.” (Piotrowski, 1982, p. 231) Analytical skills, then, are crucial, and students must become adept at identifying and defining problems, analyzing issues, coming up with solutions, evaluating possible outcomes, and weighing the advantages and disadvantages of various solutions (Einsiedel, 1995, p. 50).

Third, effective participation in case studies places a premium on good listening skills. During the small group and whole group discussions it is essential for the student to be able to follow the arguments presented and to be able to respond to questions posed.

Fourth, the exposure to a rich array of different types of language should certainly have a positive impact on language acquisition. “...all aspects of language learning can be exploited—lexicon, syntax, morphology, phonetics—not in a descriptive way, but rather actively by means of oral exercises, reading activities, listening comprehension practice, and more creative activities such as, conversations, group discussions, writing, and role playing.” (Valdivieso, 1992, p. 26) Since case studies are often embedded in authentic contexts, students are exposed to a wide variety of formal and informal language, frequently used idiomatic expressions, and technical terms specific to the case.

Fifth, the case discussion can also sharpen the students’ sociopragmatic skills. Discourse studies of the case discussion (e.g. Billmyer and Micheau, 1987) reveal that successful participation entails active participation and “understanding the intricate rules for turn taking and getting and holding the floor. . .” (p. 8). Stewart and Winn (1996, p. 49) believe two important skills which can be developed are: “the ability to effectively advocate and defend a chosen position and the ability to ‘professionally disagree’--to question, critique and challenge a colleague’s position in a respectful but compelling manner.” Expressing disagreement in a reasoned and professional way certainly demands a high level of pragmatic competence.

Finally, using the case study approach can provide practice in several skills which are not specifically taught in the classroom but are vital for success in the academic arena or the workplace. The most important of these real-life skills is the “ability to deal with complexity and uncertainty because it requires students to think, analyze, and decide in environments with multiple players, interests, and perspectives and where the one best solution rarely exists (Stewart & Winn, 1996, p. 48). Students must also learn to cope with ambiguity (Westerfield,

1987, p. 7, Candlin et al, 1982) and must be able to suspend judgment in order to weigh all the facts and issues objectively. Additionally, case studies provide practice in the use of intuition. "Students must make assumptions to fill in the gaps and draw on intuitive abilities to 'read between the lines.'" (Stewart & Winn, 1996, p. 48) Participation in cases, Grosse (1985) argues, helps students develop an "administrative point of view. . . the ability to size up a situation, consider a variety of possible ways to approach a problem, and decide on appropriate action." This also helps in "the general development of flexibility and creativity in language use." (p. 4)

2. The case study in an EFL setting

2.1 The case study method at International University of Japan

With such impressive credits it was natural then to include the case study as a component in the preparatory 9-week summer Intensive English Program (IEP) for graduate students of the International University of Japan. [For background information on the university and the IEP, see Smith, 1995 and Ahmed, 1990.] The use of the case study method had been used at the university since 1988 (Smith, 1995), however, for various reasons, including student and teacher criticism in regards to its efficacy as well as, in more recent years, the fact that fewer cases were being used by the content professors in the MBA program, the case study played only a minimal role in the summer IEP 1996.

The IEP has two major English language components: Text Skills course (TS), which focuses on the development of reading and writing skills, and the Oral Communications Skills/Academic Listening Skills course (OCS/ALS), which focuses on speaking and listening skills. In an attempt to improve the Oral Communications component and in view of the fact that the use of case studies was rather minimal, a decision was made to introduce the case study, but in a qualitatively different way than what had previously been done in the Text Skills pre-MBA course.

The goals and objectives in the OCS course were clearly different from the TS pre-MBA course. Rather than exposing students to business cases in an attempt to prepare them for what they might encounter in the MBA courses, the goal in the OCS course was focused more directly on the improvement of general communication skills. The existing OCS course consisted of seven main components: strategic classroom language practice, debate, oral

presentations, cross cultural awareness, fluency practice, the communication activity (a simulation or game activity where several of the skills previously taught were meant to be applied), and a group video project (an activity emphasizing group work and the application of oral skills learned in the course). Taking into account student self-reflections and student performance in both the IEP and in the regular terms after the summers of 1995 and 1996, it appeared that students were not particularly successful in applying the debate skills they had been taught. It was decided then to include a 'case-based discussion' in the IEP 1997. It was named the 'case-based discussion' as opposed to the case study to try to distinguish it from the type of business-oriented case study used previously at IUJ and so that students and faculty would not expect the commonly used case studies found at other institutions.

2.2 The introduction of the case-based discussion

In the debate component students were constantly encouraged to agree and disagree at varying levels of intensity, to interrupt, to grab the floor, to keep the floor, and to use fillers to hold their turn. Since the students were from Japan, Indonesia and Thailand, all of them found it unfamiliar and difficult to carry out these actions, for it seemed to conflict with the preferred communication style of their cultures. Even after having practiced these actions in the summer IEP with varying degrees of success, when called upon to perform similarly in the regular courses, students often failed to do. The gambits used to interrupt and disagree when actually used by students from the IEP were often accompanied by knowing laughter amongst those who had gone through the summer program. Their acknowledgment of the expectation of the use of the gambits but their non-performance indicate that and these behaviors had not been completely and successfully internalized.

In light of this, more time spent on practicing such behaviors in a less stressful discussion component seemed necessary. Since the debate component included two separate debates, it was decided to replace the second debate with the case-based discussion component. This component would include guided and 'sheltered' discussions in classroom groups leading up to a more demanding whole group case-based discussion.

For effective case studies the selection of the case and the materials is very important (Westerfield, 1987, 1985). When deciding which case would be best, the final decision will depend very much on the goals and objectives of the course (Einsiedel, 1995), and factors

such as the complexity, length, subject matter, and the availability of teacher notes and supplementary materials should be carefully considered (Westerfield, 1987). For language courses, adapting an authentic case by shortening or rewriting may be recommended, although Westerfield wisely points out that for advanced students this may be misleading, less appealing to them, (p. 5), and it may rob them of the real-life experience of having to sift through mountains of information to decide for themselves what is relevant.

2.3 The components of the case-based discussion

For the OCS component after searching through cases both made for ESL and those for regular MBA classes, three cases were finally selected. In this selection the program and course goals were carefully taken into account. One of the overriding goals of the entire IEP program was to expose students to materials and experiences designed to sharpen their intercultural sensitivity since during the regular academic year they would be attending classes with students from approximately 35 different countries. At the general course level an attempt was being made to integrate the Text Skills and the Oral Communications Skills components, and thus intercultural education was an important link in this integration plan. Early in the summer program the TS course distributed reading materials focused on nonverbal communication, and some time was spent in class on related exercises. At a midway point in the program the unit on case-based discussion was introduced in the OCS course making sure the students understood the differences between debate, discussion and case-based discussion. This was followed by the series of three cases.

The first case was selected from an ESL textbook, Business Across Cultures (English & Lynn, 1995) and was selected because of its relative simplicity of both the reading skill demanded and cross cultural concepts introduced. A warm-up exercise, guided exercises, explanation of vocabulary and terms, samples of letters written by the two main characters and role play situations were all part of the unit. Briefly, the chapter dealt with stereotypes and cultural generalizations, and involved a clash in interaction styles between a Japanese and a Spanish speaker.

The second case was also taken from an ESP text, English for Corporate Communications (Spring-Wallace, 1993). This case was a bit more complex and involved the differing expectations of a good manager. Here a Japanese manager of a car manufacturer

operating in the U.S. was getting feedback from a diverse group of American employees. This unit contained a preview section, vocabulary section, a 1 ½-page case history, a comprehension check, a group problem solving worksheet, which included identifying the problem, understanding the case, reasons for the problem, reaching a solution, proposed solutions, class discussion, role play, feedback and advice on communication strategies.

The final case was not from an ESL/EFL text--International Business Case Studies for the Multicultural Marketplace (Moran, Braaten & Walsh, eds., 1994). The case selected was clearly more complex than the previous cases, was 17 pages long and had no preview or guided exercises. The case involved a bank with several branches in California where the diverse workforce had differing reactions to the upper management and to their fellow colleagues. The bank employees spoke 64 different languages and dialects, and the vice-president and manager of personnel was facing problems dealing with such a diverse group.

Students generally had had little or no experience with cross cultural differences, much less with the magnitude of diversity represented in this case. In order to provide them with some background, a lecture on the benefits of diversity training and illustrations of cultural stereotyping and human perception was given to the whole group. The introduction of case-based discussion and the preparations for the whole group case-based discussion were carried out in separate class sections (there were four sections of 14-15 students each). The four instructors had different levels of experience with case studies, ranging from none at all to substantial experience in as a student in business administration courses.

The last lesson on the case-based discussion was a whole group case discussion, and students were informed that they would be assessed according to how many times they spoke out in the large group discussion and this would be taken into account in their final participation scores. It was made clear to the students that their first priority was participation and there would be no critical assessment of the content of their comments. The intention was to place pressure on students to participate actively and to present the facts accurately, and not place pressure for the quality of their statements. Afterwards the students were requested to write an individual case summary including their recommendations and action plan.

3. A critique of the case-based discussion

3.1 A list of critical areas to address

In general replacing the second debate with the case-based discussion proved to be very successful. Important cross cultural concepts were successfully introduced, a good cross section of the students were able to participate actively during the whole group discussion, and some students produced competent writing summaries of the case. In the coordinator's overall evaluation the general objectives set for the unit had been met: To raise student awareness of intercultural differences, to expose students to a modified case discussion, and to provide students with more practice with academic discussion skills. However, this is not to say that there were no problems in implementing the change. There were several difficulties which need to be addressed and improved, and therefore the rest of this paper will focus on the areas in need of improvement.

The first and most severe problem was time. Given the fact that students were dealing with a completely new format and with fairly new concepts related to intercultural education, the lessons did not allow students sufficient time to process the information and practice the behavior patterns required. During the whole group case-based discussion, student responses remained at the descriptive level and did not move quickly enough to the more substantive discussion of various solutions. In the class sections not enough emphasis and time were devoted to role plays, small group discussion of issues, brainstorming of possible solutions, and how to write an effective action plan. Although it seemed that the gradual increase in difficulty and complexity of the three cases was good, attempting to fit them all into the allotted time frame, in the final analysis, negated this positive factor.

Another problem was the lack of uniformity in the presentation of the three cases among the four sections. This can be attributed to the lack of proper orientation and training of the instructors by the coordinator, which was again the constraint of time and the misconception on the part of the coordinator that the instructors were already well equipped since they had all the materials and had had a general introduction. (For the IEP, instructors from other universities are hired every year to teach during the summer term and, therefore, do not have the benefit of long-term experience with the students and the course syllabus and materials.) In the student course evaluations, there was a tendency for those who were in the sections led by instructors who had had more experience with case studies to rate the

component more highly. A few of the students in the sections with the less experienced instructors expressed opinions about the case-based discussion revealing that they had clearly misunderstood the goals and objectives of the case-based discussion. This was certainly unfortunate.

A third area of difficulty was that some key concepts in case studies were not properly transmitted to the students. For example, it seemed that a few students still held to the belief that there was “one right solution” and that the discussion was simply an exercise in talking about the issues. Rodgers (1993) believes that “Part of the teacher’s role involves creating the proper class atmosphere,” and that “the teacher must cede center stage in order to give the students the opportunity to get actively involved in the cases” (p. 9). My general evaluation is that because of the lack of time and lack of skill on the part of the coordinator, the students never had the opportunity to enjoy the center stage which they needed in order to become deeply engaged in the discussion. The cases did not capture student interest needed to emotionally involve them. In retrospect the cases appeared to belong only to the pages of the books rather than representing burning issues in an actual person’s life. The presentation of the cases and the atmosphere of the class undoubtedly needed some spark to bring it to life.

It is also probable that students and instructors were not clear about the learning objectives of the case-based discussion. This lack of clarity stemmed from the way the case-based discussion was developed. Only after implementing this component did the coordinator have a chance to spend time reading at greater depth about the various educational implications of using a modified version of the case study approach. Having pointed out the major weaknesses of the case-based discussion, we will turn to the literature to search for concrete suggestions from experts and practitioners of the case method.

4. What makes a successful case study?

4.1 The instructor’s role

The case study approach has many positive features which fit well into the overall goals of the IEP. The main feature which recommends it is the fact that it is quite student-centered, since students have to discover for themselves what the issues and possible solutions are. The responsibility of the instructor, then, is quite great. The teacher must be deeply involved in

directing the flow of discussion, yet allow the students to have the main control of the content of the discussion. It is a challenge which demands a high degree of skill.

The teacher must give up some control of the class, unable to use a planned lecture or an instructor centered question-answer session. Instead, the case study approach calls for a difficult to plan, free-flowing discussion that is driven by student ideas. The discussion is likely to take interesting but unpredictable turns. The teacher has to be flexible, and prepared for any eventuality in the discussion. (Grosse, 1985, p. 5)

Rangan (1995) points out that the effective instructor allows students to learn inductively. The instructor has to allow the student discussion to uncover the faulty logic. S/he has to make sure that many different points of view are given so that the students will see for themselves which ones are weak and why. "A good case instructor does not intellectually dominate the case discussion." (pp. 2-3)

A good case instructor is also adept at asking the right questions at the right time. Piotrowski says:

the instructor should develop a line of questioning which will advance group thinking. A dozen well-framed questions which will produce a meaningful interchange. . . are worth more than three dozen yes/no questions which provoke no thought. The aim of the instructor should be to ask questions which allow students to synthesize information, questions which reveal the relevance of the discussion that has gone before. (p. 236)

Grosse (1985) keeps the standards quite high by demanding "the right question of a specific student at the appropriate time to maximize learning for all." (pp. 4-5) Shapiro (1984) advises both teachers and students to "strive to develop the ability to ask 'the right questions' about each case" (p. 2), and Hammond (1980) stresses it even more:

Perhaps the most important benefit of using cases is that they help managers learn how to ask the right questions. An able business leader once commented: 'Ninety per cent of the task of a top manager is to ask useful questions. Answers are relatively easy to find, but asking good questions, that is the more critical skill.' (p. 2).

Shapiro (1984), an expert from the Harvard Business School, advises: "Use questions to manage the trade-off between depth and breadth, and to heighten conflict." (p. 3) Since there is never enough time to cover everything in a case, "questions, or perhaps a statement or two, can be used to provide the necessary focus." (p. 4) He suggests that the case instructor use various questions for various purposes.

Some might be to a particular student to encourage development of a particular point or to clarify an opinion or statement. Others might be 'to the wall, floor, or ceiling.' That is, they are gentle nudges to the discussion and are addressed to no one in particular. 'I wonder how the competition would react,' is an example. (p. 4)

A good case discussion also involves a high degree of participation from as many students as possible. In order to foster high participation levels, Grosse (1985) tells teachers:

to promote student to student interaction, rather than teacher to student discussion. . . . The teacher can ask questions which are derived from previous student comments or she can suggest alternative approaches to problems. She might also highlight neglected information and its possible consequences.

Other techniques include the request for clarification of assumptions or for a summary of the discussion at any point in the class. (p. 6)

Einsiedel (1995) states that "it is important to ensure that all learners have equal opportunity for participation. Trainers may have to find ways to encourage timid class members to participate more actively, while suppressing the participation of their more dominant classmates." Non-native speakers of English in particular may have difficulty participating "because they are not familiar with the sociolinguistic rules governing student/teacher and student/student interaction in that situation."

(Westerfield, 1990, p. 2) They need to become aware of "turn-taking, the timing of responses, the specific gambits used, the 'devil's advocate' ploy of the instructor, and the acceptability of questioning or disagreeing with him/her." (p. 2)

Not only must the case instructor prepare ahead of time by thoroughly understanding the theory, concepts and facts involved in the case, but s/he should try to anticipate the discussion. ". . . you should anticipate the key learning points that are likely to surface at different stages of the case study. Plan on pausing the action for a

process check at selected points during the session.” (Einsiedel (1995, p. 52) Grosse (1985) advises the instructor to:

try to predict the course of the discussion and prepare for possible alternative responses by the students. The opening and closing of the course can be planned by considering whether to ask for volunteers or select lead students to start the opening discussion or to summarize at the end of class. (p. 6).

During the case discussion, Rangan (1995) says attention should be paid to two important elements of the structure of the case discussion. First, there is the amount of time devoted to major themes and clear and deliberate transitions should be made between them. Second, attention needs to be paid to the verbal and visual cues of the information being brought forward. It is important to write useful headings on the board and to be aware of their spatial arrangement (p. 4) as these visual cues are crucial in keeping the students on track and aware of the points being raised. He points out that it is not necessary to write everything which students say during the discussion, but more importantly to get “the thematic headings and substantive guide posts that enable the class to build consensus or argue its merits.” (p. 4)

All the experts agree that the case instructor has to be good at listening. In fact, Rangan says it is the “primary job” of the case instructor. Shapiro (1984) writes:

If student ownership of the discussion is important, the role of the instructor as listener is perhaps the most critical element in establishing that ownership. The instructor should limit his or her own comment during the discussion and should be sure to listen hard and carefully to each comment. This encourages the students to listen to each other, and to view participation as serious. Most important, the instructor’s listening establishes the primacy of students’ comments in the classroom. (p. 4)

He also points out the importance of listening so that then the instructor can provide “respect and protection to students and their comments” (p.4) as this will make them feel more comfortable in participating and airing their thoughts.

By listening well the case instructor can also manage conflict effectively. Far from being something to be avoided, conflict in the discussion is extremely useful. He writes:

The essence of case discussion is the airing of conflict between two or more opposing views. The best discussions include opposing views which are supportable and reasonable. One of the instructor's tasks is to clarify and heighten conflicts. The clarification and heightening provides a richness and excitement to the discussion. Students should be encouraged to openly and honestly consider difference of opinion."(p. 4)

Keeping in mind that the students in the IEP come from cultures which tend to avoid conflict and to strive towards consensus and harmony, this element of case discussion may present problems in the IEP. This concern will be dealt with in the next section.

To lead an effective case discussion, it is important to be aware of the pace of the discussion. "A reasonably fast pace makes the class more enjoyable and gives the opportunity for greater coverage." (Shapiro, 1984, p. 4) Piotrowski (1982) mentions that the instructor should "sense the pace of the discussion and maintain a level at which everyone is comprehending but no one is bored. . . . The instructor must learn to keep out of the way and let things happen" (p. 237). This places quite a burden on the case instructor—s/he must be skillful enough to intervene only when needed and to lead a teacher-fronted yet student-centered discussion.

Shapiro gives detailed advice about how body language can help in maintaining a good pace.

It helps to move around the classroom and to stand at different points. Nonverbal gestures can also help to manage the discussion. They can, for example, encourage the shy, hesitant student or discourage the student who shouts out comments without being recognized to speak. The teacher's physical position can also help the students to talk to one another. Standing on the side or back of the classroom so that other students are between the speaker and the teacher helps students talk to one another. A stronger message which must be used very selectively is delivered by standing behind the student who is speaking. When the students consistently talk to one another rather than to the teacher, they truly take ownership of the class.

(pp. 4-5)

If the case discussion reaches this point, the students are truly teaching each other.

4.2 How to help the students

Let us now direct our attention to our students and consider how we can help them to be successful in the case discussion. Billmyer and Micheau's study (1987) of the discourse strategies used in the case study came up with the following skills required for effective participation on the part of the student: a) preparation of the case, b) clarity and conciseness of language, c) ability to respond appropriately to a variety of questions and directives, d) understanding and abiding by the rules of turn taking. Foreign students have difficulty in knowing how and when to bid for a turn, and they "frequently fail to respond quickly enough to nominations, insert inappropriately long intrasentential pauses or take inappropriately long turns" (p. 11). The last skill needed in the case discussion is: e) cooperative solution building. This means listening to what others have to say and incorporating new ideas to one's own analysis and solution. (p 11).

Westerfield (1990) cites three main areas where non-native speakers of English may face difficulty in adjusting to the case study approach. A) They have to cope with language-related problems and may be faced with rather demanding reading, writing, speaking and listening tasks (p. 1); b) They are unfamiliar with the class format and the methodology, and often they have been previously trained to search for the "right answer"; and c) They also lack important cultural background knowledge which is needed for the understanding of the case (p. 3).

The teachers who lead case-based discussions clearly need to be sensitive to the difficulties that the nonnative speaker faces. Before the case discussion, using sheltered and guided exercises which help the student to bid for turns, to hold the floor and to learn appropriate turn taking strategies will no doubt be useful. Raising awareness of the cultural schemata related to cases and teaching the specific vocabulary and structures often connected with the cases are also crucial. Westerfield (1987) suggests videotaping students or viewing videotaped examples of case discussions as a way to help them become more effective participants. Piotrowski (1982) also suggests that instructors act as language consultants and offer tutoring sessions to deal with language-related problems (pp. 233-4).

One useful suggestion contributed by Shapiro (1984) is to "*establish an explicit contract with the students* by showing your expectations about their performance and yours early in the course." (p. 2) Since we know that the IEP students often retain their culture's expectation of the teacher's role, it may be very useful to make it clear from the start that the

“teacher’s role is that of a discussion or exploration guide, rather than the traditional authority figure who supplies the correct answers.” (Grosse, 1985, p. 4) According to Rodgers (1993) the role of the teacher “requires a change in mid set from a more traditional teacher-centered approach to the role of activator and resource person.” (p. 7) Shapiro (1984) is strong about making sure “the students accept and maintain ownership of the discussion.” (p. 3) There is always the tendency of students from no matter what their culture to try to give the answers that the teacher believes in. In the case-based discussion, it is extremely important that the instructor not give his/her opinion either explicitly or implicitly. “Avoid making a choice about the case decision but force each student to do so. It is useful to state in the course introduction that ‘the only person who doesn’t need to make a decision about the case is me, the instructor.’” (p. 3) The explicit contract will remind students that they should be operating in a different mode than the one they are normally used to.

Finally, it would be useful to give Shapiro’s (1984) sound advice to the students: “The case method is demanding of both teachers and students. Participants who get actively involved in each case analysis and discussion, and who attempt to generalize their learning across cases, gain the most from the process.” (p. 2) Though there is still more advice from the experts to report, what we have so far provides a substantial basis from which to draw lessons which can help us in the future.

5. Recommendations

5.1 Macro-level recommendations for the case-based discussion

In making changes to the case-based discussion it is necessary to address concerns both at the macro and the micro levels. This discussion will begin with the more general changes, placing those considered more pressing first, and move to more specific details, which may or may not be incorporated in the next summer session

The problem of time definitely needs to be addressed. The time allotted for the case-based discussion was simply not sufficient. Students and teachers had to pack too much into a limited time frame, and much of the material which should have been covered was simply not covered. For the future, either the amount of time devoted to the case-based discussion needs to be increased or the number of cases has to decrease. There is always the possibility of using a new case—perhaps only one case and one which is more realistic and interesting

to the students. If it is a complex case, more time can be spent working through the case such that students can gain a better understanding of what is involved in a case study.

One note of caution needs to be made. The decision as to which case or cases to use is an extremely important one, and thus time constraints should not be the main factor in case selection. The overall goals and objectives should be the decisive factor. For example, if the priority is to expose students to case study, the suggestion above about one case may be in order. However, if the target is to provide experience in communication strategies in the case study framework, the series of gradually more difficult cases may have its merits.

As mentioned in the critique, the goals, objectives and expected behaviors of students and teachers should have been made more explicit. Perhaps it is because the macro-level goals were not spelled out even though the lower level course objectives had been presented. Merseeth's interesting paper (1992) may help in this regard. The paper explained why the case method worked very well in business schools but was not successful in teacher education, and the author's point was that the conceptual orientation of the program had not been clarified. In any type of program once this conceptual orientation is specified then this will decide the best match of types of cases and their purposes. Merseeth outlines three conceptual orientations for teacher education programs which use cases: 1) to teach students the skills of analysis, decision making and problem solving using an inductive process; 2) to use cases as specific examples of established theories; and 3) to use cases written for personal study and self reflection where "the teacher-learner is at the center of the educational process." (p. 246) A parallel lesson can be drawn here: We need to clearly define the conceptual orientation for the Oral Communications course first and then make the decisions about the case and its presentation.

Another area of concern was the lack of uniformity in the presentation of the unit as well as the probability that key concepts were not completely understood by both instructors and students. At the program level it is possible to place a priority on hiring faculty with demonstrated experience with the case study approach and with intercultural sensitivity. Keeping in mind that case instructors need to have highly developed facilitating skills, it is perhaps best to revise our hiring guidelines and not expect that a brief orientation and some written guidelines will ensure that the case-based discussion will be effective.

5.2 Micro-level recommendations

Based on a few written and oral comments from students about the case-based discussion unit, it appeared that some enjoyed the cases and were able to participate actively. The written case summaries assigned at the end indicated that indeed some had understood the overall purpose quite well, while others were not very clear and were unable to submit a reasonable summary. In retrospect, there are now a number of specific areas which can be improved.

a) The first two cases had many supporting exercises to take students through the case, and although they were helpful for both students and teachers, they *looked like* the usual EFL lesson, thus eliciting the usual patterns of behavior expected in an EFL class. I would suggest transforming these exercises into more authentic real-life materials. For example, for the first case rather than giving students a copy of a chapter taken from an ESL book, instead presenting them with actual letters written by the two main characters and playing the role of their supervisor who is in a dilemma because two of the best employees are having severe difficulties working together. The preview section or the exercises providing language support and cross cultural concepts need not be presented as part of a textbook chapter, but can be delivered more directly, say for example, by the teacher playing the role of a consultant to the company.

As mentioned in the critique, the cases which were used belonged to the pages of the textbook and did not engage the students emotionally. An attempt should be made to make the materials more stimulating and realistic and more typical of a real-life case study. As Piotrowski (1982) writes "A first requirement is that the material be of interest to the students because their cooperation is required" (p. 231).

b) After the macro level conceptual orientation has been articulated, it is still necessary to make sure that the goals, objectives and expected behaviors be clearly laid out for both students and teachers. The materials for both teachers and students need to be supplemented and need to be constantly highlighted during the course. Shapiro's suggestion of an explicit contract between teachers and students should definitely be incorporated. As Rodgers (1993) emphasized: "the introduction phase, step one, is very important as any misunderstanding of the goal of the case or the various groups' role can lead to disaster" (p. 6). Since students are being expected to demonstrate behavioral patterns which are not typical of the usual academic classroom and not typical in their particular cultures, the need to make the students

understand that the teacher/student roles are qualitatively different during this particular component cannot be emphasized enough.

c) Students are facing a number of challenges when trying to be successful in the case-based discussion. They are dealing with tremendous language-related demands, with underlying cross cultural demands and with the demands of performance peculiar to the case study approach. Considering this heavy burden, it is important to provide support which will help the student cope. First, sensitivity on the part of instructors is necessary. Next awareness on the part of the students is in order, and finally actual exercises during class to help them practice the expected behaviors are essential.

Some of the suggestions given in the previous section should be considered. Westerfield's concrete suggestion about the use of videotapes to raise awareness about effective discourse strategies along with actual practice can be quite valuable. Piotrowski's suggestion of the instructor playing the role of language consultant and offering tutoring sessions or conferences outside of class could be effective as well. Classroom exercises focused upon turn-taking, grabbing and holding the floor, interrupting, agreeing and disagreeing etc. should be developed. Raising awareness of the necessity of conflict during a good case-based discussion should be included since, as pointed out earlier, student preferred interactional styles are likely to be weighted towards the opposite—the avoidance of conflict. Addressing these needs generally makes for stimulating classes for students and teachers alike.

d) In retrospect, not enough emphasis was given to group brainstorming, group discussion, role plays and the writing of action plans. All of these need to be systematically included in the lesson plans. Engaging students in solving real-life problems is a prerequisite to a good case study. Each of these elements—group dynamics, role plays and simulations and writing—can be effective tools to involve students. Demanding written comments, summaries and recommendations from students can also help the instructor monitor the progress of the lesson. It is indeed probable that “Unless a written component is required, the students often skim the cases and reach quick, shallow judgments.” (Siciliano, 1997, pp. 210-11) Student writing can help reinforce the positive behaviors expected in the case-based discussion. Students will most likely benefit by being forced to articulate their opinions, ensuring that they will be well prepared and confident before going into the whole group discussion.

There are clearly many positive changes which can be implemented, however, it is important to keep a realistic perspective. Since the time constraint was at the top of the problem list, it may not be feasible to make all the changes suggested. It should be kept in mind that the case-based discussion unit is only one of the many components in the Oral Communications course and there are considerable demands from other quarters. As much as possible, then, the lessons which can be linked with the other components should be delineated as this can maximize overall learning.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to present and critically evaluate the case-based discussion component of the Oral Communications course in the Intensive English Program at International University of Japan. In order to make informed recommendations, it was necessary to go to other sources of information, particularly drawing from those who use the case study approach in the language classroom, and also including a few experts from the Harvard Business School. Much has been written about the advantages of the case study approach, but little has been written about how to deal with the real-life difficulties the case instructor will encounter in the classroom. The particular problems faced by students who are non-native speakers of English from cultures which have different expectations of teacher and student performance presents particular challenges.

It is hoped that this paper will provide a sound basis upon which to make changes to the existing course. The extensive presentation of the work of practitioners in the field was deliberate—hopefully it will provide a sound framework from which instructors both for the IEP program and for other programs can make informed decisions in course and program design.

One thing is very clear. The success of the case study indeed depends quite heavily on the instructor. The instructor has the responsibility of selecting the case, making sure the goals and objectives are clearly laid out, of leading a discussion which is student-centered, provocative and intense, and in the final analysis of articulating what has been learned. Though reading about case studies is valuable, it is necessary to develop the skills through experience. Andrews (1953) of the *Harvard Business Review* said that it depends more on skill than on knowledge (p.48), and Shapiro (1984) of the Harvard Business School adds: “Because case teaching is very much a mixture of art and skill, much of the case teacher’s

development is through trial and error, experience, and a realistic review of past experience.” (p. 1) He is realistic when he writes: “There is no single approach to case teaching. Instead, there are a wide variety of approaches which work for different people in different situations. . . .Do not strive or expect to simulate another teacher’s style or approach. You should, instead develop a style that is comfortable for you.” He adds encouragement to all of us: “Almost anyone can become an effective case teacher with enough devotion, concentration, and hard work.” (p. 1) Though it is a heavy responsibility, it also offers tremendous opportunities to improve one’s teaching skills.

Case studies cannot always deliver all the positive outcomes listed in section 1.1. It is important to keep in perspective the reasons for using the case study. Shapiro (1984) leaves us with the final word of advice: “. . .use case discussion to accomplish what they can do better than other pedagogical methods.” (p. 2) It is easy to become enthusiastic about the use of cases in the language classroom, so it is wise to always temper our decisions about its applicability keeping foremost in our minds the goals and objectives of our particular students and programs.

Notes

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