The Case for Teaching with Business Cases

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Rather than stopping at the hotel so he could drop off his luggage, Jay insisted that they go straight to the office and start analyzing why sales were down in Brazil. He kept trying to bring the topic up on the long drive into the city, but Mr. Pessoa insisted on asking him questions about his family and pointing out landmarks in the city, this being Jay's first visit to Brazil…
(business case excerpt, from *The South American Sales Dilemma* in Gillespie & Hennessy, 2010)

The Business Case Method: A Brief Definition

The case method is commonly used in medical and law schools to teach students how to handle the kinds of problems that they will face in their respective fields. Similar to cases in those two fields, a *business* case tells the story, including any relevant background information, of a problem or situation that a business (or key people in a business or industry) faced, where a turning point was reached and a decision needed to be made. "Closed" cases include the company's solution at the conclusion of the case, whereas "open" cases do not reveal the outcome and thus comprise an active-learning exercise.

Language teachers are often surprised to learn that business cases are not always focused on problems based on numbers (e.g., profit margins) or concepts less familiar to those not trained in business. Indeed, many international business cases present problems centered on cultural (mis)communication, a topic in which language professionals have expert knowledge. For that reason, cases can be a valuable tool in business language classes, and the methods commonly used for teaching with cases are abundantly familiar to language teaching professionals.

Familiar Methods for Language Teachers

Role-playing. Beyond merely describing the problem, open cases have the potential to place the students in the role of decision-maker through a simulation. Just like in typical role-play scenarios in language classes, case simulations immerse students in a situation and foster active engagement with the question at hand and with each other. Working through the case — identifying the problem, analyzing different options, formulating and proposing a solution — helps build communicative competence and problem-solving skills simultaneously. As Mauffette-Leenders, Erskine & Leenders (2001) put it, when students learn through the case method, they have the opportunity to try out their new skills "in a laboratory setting" where risk-taking can be encouraged rather than deterred.

Reading carefully. Many business cases include a video component that adds visual dimension and interest to the story, for instance through company or product footage, or interviews with key players about the problem in the case. Yet at the root of nearly all cases is a text that must

be carefully read and understood. Language teachers are adept at reading strategy instruction, from skimming and scanning to reading for detail.

Interpreting multiple meanings. We often assume that non-fictional texts are straightforward, factual, and have no need for interpretation. Perhaps this is true for some non-fiction – though even seemingly simple and straightforward texts can sometimes still need a good deal of interpretation!

Because they are typically based on real situations, cases are considered non-fiction, but the opportunity for interpretation of characters' motivations, responses, etc., is rich. Working with cases students thus encourage Common Core skill-building such as learning to "Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevances and sufficiency of the evidence" (Aligning, p.6).

If you would like to know more about business cases, there are numerous online resources, most of which are also "case providers," i.e., they sell cases, and accompanying teaching materials that can be downloaded, for example:

- Harvard Business for Educators http://hbsp.harvard.edu/product/cases
- Darden Business Publishing https://store.darden.virginia.edu/

These resources were created for the business educator and not for the language teaching professional. In contrast, the *e-Handbook on Teaching with Business Cases* was created specifically for language teachers. It introduces language teachers to the business case method, providing example cases and best practices, and it is available for free on the website of the GW-CIBER (Center for International Business Education and Research) at the George Washington University:

Funded by a grant from the Department of Education, the GW-CIBER (one of 31 CIBERs nationwide) supports projects to enhance U.S. competitiveness in the international marketplace. This includes projects, like the e-Handbook, that help develop students' foreign language and cultural proficiency.

Convincing language teachers about the potential of teaching with the business case method is the easy part. At this point it is a challenge to find useable cases in foreign languages. For this reason, GW-CIBER is working towards establishing a clearinghouse for business cases for business language teaching, where teachers can post and download cases along with lesson plans and other teaching materials. Visit the GW-CIBER Business Languages website for access to resources like the e-Handbook and to read updates on the future business language case clearinghouse.

References

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