

Developing Business English skills using case studies in the framework of multilevel education

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Modern language teaching practices combine traditional teacher- and student-oriented paradigms. Since language is perceived as a tool that helps achieve practical goals, especially in the realm of professional language studies, a need arises to teach it as an application-oriented instrument. The paper considers the methods of communicative and task-based language training with a particular focus on case studies. While the commonly accepted view holds that case studies are applied at advanced levels only, the study argues that they are applicable at various levels. This argument is justified through a practical experiment involving two student groups taking English for Specific Purposes within Advanced and Pre-Intermediate courses. The article describes the challenges and differences in students' performance and the way their work was assessed. The research states that case studies should be adapted to the level of students' language proficiency to help them naturally take on professional roles and use the language spontaneously. At the same time, attention should be paid to the adequacy of business vocabulary and the dynamism of the training process, in which case appropriate teacher intervention may be necessary. The study concludes that the method can be beneficial in terms of students' future professional activities.

KEYWORDS: English for Specific Purposes, teaching methods, multilevel education, case study, communicative method, task-based language training, assessment



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1. INTRODUCTION

The communicative method, globally applied in the process of foreign language teaching, is implemented in the framework of multilevel education corresponding to a set of specific principles of training organisation. Foreign language courses need to be in sync with the students' specialisations to develop the communicative and professional competencies of

future specialists. In the context of the new educational standard of the Russian Federation, multilevel education is becoming especially important. It is widely used in world practice and is currently gaining ground in the Russian community of foreign language teachers. Multilevel education refers to the organisation of the learning process, in which each student has the opportunity to master the learning process at

different levels, but not below the basic level, depending on his or her abilities and individual characteristics. At the same time, the assessment criteria used to evaluate students' activity are the efforts they make to master this material and to use it in a creative way (Bray & Thomas, 1995).

Another widespread method is based on specific task setting. Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) puts the value and the communicative function of the language at the forefront (Ahmadian, 2016; Bygate, 2016; East, 2016; Ponomarenko, 2016). The method proceeds from the fact that language represents more than just a system of rules and should be viewed as a 'dynamic resource for creating meaning' (Nunan, 1989, p. 12). In contrast to the traditional Present-Practice-Produce format, the modern communicative method of foreign language teaching aims not only at having the students master the explicit rules of grammar, but at helping them develop a comprehensive ability to use the language (Boersma & Van Leussen, 2017; Radyuk et al., 2016).

Thus, from the TBLT perspective language can be described as a means of communication, allowing students to perform various functions while focusing on meaning (content), rather than form (structure).

The Case Study Method (hereinafter – CSM), embodying the principles of TBLT, is one of the

most effective ways to conduct, organise and manage Business English teaching. Researchers are unanimous in their opinion that case studies are a valuable pedagogic resource that should be used to the fullest, as they make Business English and Business Language studies more efficient and student-centred (Breslin & Buchanan, 2008; Hyett et al., 2014; Ryerson, 2017).

This research looks into how CSM works in the framework of multilevel education. Due to the complexity of CSM and a rather extensive volume of tasks incorporated in this method, CSM is commonly used with advanced students. This paper sets out to establish if the skills improved were similar among the students of two academic groups exhibiting different levels of English proficiency. The hypothesis is that CSM can also be applied to train students with lower levels of language proficiency.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The procedure involved analysing the performance of two groups studying ESP at the Faculty of Economics (RUDN University) in 2016-2017.

Group 1 comprised three CEFR A2-B1 level students and five B2-C1 level students who took up the course at the Upper-Intermediate level. Group 2 was represented by six A2-B1 level students and three B2 students taking the course at the Pre-Intermediate level.

Table 1

Participants in the experiment

	GROUP 1	GROUP 2
Year of study	2	3
Number of students	8	9
Course book	Business Upper Intermediate	Business Benchmark Pre-Intermediate

Table 2

Initial level of language proficiency

	GROUP 1	GROUP 2
C1	1	–
B2	4	3
B1	2	4
A2	1	2

The case study for Group 1 included an introductory discussion, two reading tasks, two listening tasks and final discussion – holding a meeting and reaching a decision concerning a disciplinary issue. The assessment table below summarises the skills to be trained (Table 3).

For Group 2, the case study included role cards for students to use in small groups. A lower level of language proficiency supposes less introductory data and shorter tasks. Nevertheless, the

communicative goal was similar to that in Group 1 – to solve a conflict and achieve agreement on timely delivery. Unlike Group 1 students, Group 2 participants made a prepared speech as part of their case study. Here, listening skills and spontaneous speech skills were excluded from the assessment.

Case study efficiency was assessed for the entire group and individually based on each student's input.

Table 3

Skills assessed in Group 1

TASK	SKILL
Discussion	Students are able to participate in discussions on professional topics, express their opinions in spontaneous monologues /conversations and defend their arguments.
Listening	Students are able to understand oral speech generally and in detail and formulate their own statements based on information retrieved using professional vocabulary.
Meeting	Students are able to simulate a meeting on a professional topic using active speech patterns in compliance with structural and logical principles of speech organisation, express proposals and agreement (disagreement), compromise and reach a mutually acceptable solution.

3. STUDY AND RESULTS

Foreign language teaching methodology is commonly divided into teacher- and student-oriented approaches. The teacher-oriented approach implies that the teacher is the dominant figure in the classroom, while students are viewed as 'empty vessels', whose main role is to passively absorb the suggested information to be further subjected to testing and evaluation. The main duty of the teacher in this lesson model is to transfer knowledge and information to students. Training and assessment are understood as two separate, independent activities. Students' success is measured by objective test scores.

The student-oriented method suggests that teachers and students play an equally active role in the learning process (Aliusta & Özer, 2017; Harju & Åkerblom, 2017). The teacher's role in this case study involves coaching, mentoring and inspiring students to master the material. Students' progress is assessed on the basis of both formal and informal criteria, including group projects, student portfolios and participation in the lesson. Teaching and evaluation are interrelated. Students' progress is continuously assessed by the teacher.

Foreign language teachers always look for the most efficient ways to structure, plan and conduct

classes (Scott, 2007; Stewart, 2012). Interestingly, the traditional Present-Practice-Produce format may not be very useful in terms of boosting students' motivation (due to the dominant role of the teacher in the lesson). Although students cope with grammatical exercises, they cannot successfully use English in real situations so even with several years of study, they lack sufficient linguistic competence.

Business English teachers tend to believe in developing the students' ability to communicate in a foreign language, and not just compose grammatically correct statements (Ponomarenko & Malyuga, 2012; Susam-Sarajeva, 2009). The focus has now shifted to training communication skills

through roleplays, projects, simulations, and case studies. Fulfilling communicative tasks implies active student participation, which makes the classes more motivating and effective.

The tasks students perform in the classroom are relevant to their future professional communication, which enhances their motivation (Jones & Russell, 2008; Malyuga, 2016).

In the experiment, both groups were motivated and showed interest in the positive outcome of communication. Group 1 performance was generally assessed as very good, while Group 2 performance was assessed as good (see Tables 4-5).

Table 4

Performance of Group 1 students in the case study

PROFICIENCY LEVEL & STUDENT	COMMENTS	MARK
C1 Dmitry	Good level of business vocabulary, usage of active speech patterns.	B
B2 Lyubov	Well-grounded arguments, ability to polemicise.	B
B2 Valentina	Adequate spontaneous speech, insufficient usage of advanced business vocabulary.	C
B2 Maria	Good active listening skills, usage of cooperative strategies.	B
B2 Valeria	Good facilitator, ability to stimulate initiative in colleagues.	B
B1 Maxim	Participation not active enough.	C
B1 Marina	Good comprehension skills, ability to paraphrase.	B
A2 Paulina	Lack of business vocabulary, lack of initiative.	D

Table 5

Performance of Group 2 students in the study

PROFICIENCY LEVEL & STUDENT	COMMENTS	MARK
B2 Victoria	Able to accept criticism. Not so active, but performed her role.	C
B2 Nikita	Good usage of active speech patterns, communicative goal achieved.	B
B2 Valentin	Active participation, involvement of other students.	B
B1 Victoria	Able to work out common decisions, but missed some honorific forms.	C
B1 Christina	Chose appropriate style and degree of formality.	C
B1 Maria	Managed to adapt to the requirements of the customer, showed flexibility.	C
B1 Nikolay	Suggested a range of original ideas.	C
A2 Mahomed	Needed to prepare his speech, good level of business vocabulary.	C
A2 Egor	Needed to prepare his speech.	D

In the case study, most of the students used English spontaneously and naturally. This method treats language as a tool for solving business problems, as a means of communication in a typical business situation. Notably, in the case study, high-level linguistic requirements are imposed on the language itself. The case study assumes that students have a high enough level of language proficiency to reflect on the situation under study, otherwise the case study loses its significance. For Group 1 (advanced level) students, this remains true. The case study developed for Group 2 (pre-intermediate level) students was designed to correspond to their linguistic ability. Table 5 shows that students used enough business vocabulary

and active speech patterns to reach fulfil their communicative goals and work as a team. This is why, in the Business English teachers' community, the view is spreading that, at least for business, if less so for language learning, a simpler version of English, the so-called 'Globish' (Nerriere & Hon, 2009), may be preferable.

4. DISCUSSION

The experiment shows that the case study format plays a leading role in the development of both linguistic and extralinguistic competences among students, namely, communication skills that are actualised in the business context (meetings, presentations and negotiations). In both groups,

case studies allowed students to develop social management skills, teamwork, decision-making, critical thinking, problem solving and organisational skills. For Business English learners, case studies are a valuable opportunity to use their knowledge in solving business problems (real or constructed). Most of the participants played the role of managers and were able to present and substantiate their point of view, offer problem-solving solutions, compete with each other, and demonstrate their analytical and managerial skills.

While some might argue that the genre of 'simulation' or 'case study' is 'wrong' teaching, the data supporting the advantages of CSM are more than persuasive (Daly, 2002). Practice shows that CSM helps inspire students towards independent and critical thinking. Students take on managerial positions, develop and sharpen communication skills in business situations, learn how to hold meetings, take part in negotiations and make presentations. Furthermore, being put in a real (or close to real) business situation, students practise English naturally.

The study showed that preparing and participating in case studies students expand and deepen their knowledge of the complexities and subtleties of intercultural communication, approaching the status of a citizen of the world. Since case studies are often very informative, students have to quickly analyse the source material, find logically

completed ideas, and team up to find a solution to the problem. Students improve their writing and communication skills; working in close interaction with the rest of the group, they also understand the importance of non-verbal communication.

By the end of the term, the two groups had developed the skills of collaborative learning and cooperation, as well as teamworking skills. They learned to feel and follow the team spirit, which requires personal qualities such as the ability to establish contacts, demonstrate friendliness and flexibility, socialise, compromise, cooperate, adapt to the changing conditions, and accept criticism.

5. CONCLUSION

Practising CSM in Business English classes raises a number of challenges. Often teachers deal with situations where students do not have adequate business vocabulary. The teacher's task is then to motivate students to expand their vocabulary. In addition, within the framework of TBLT, the lexical dimension of the language is gaining increasing recognition. Mastering business vocabulary is a matter of primary importance for Business English and Business Language students.

In the context of multilevel education, the experiment demonstrated the need to ensure that all students are involved in the learning process. There is every reason to encourage students to develop an active, interested attitude, as well as

the ability to listen to and respect each other's opinions. The teacher should rely on the knowledge of students in the field of business and carefully prepare for the presentation of the case study. It is not enough just to briefly describe the conditions of the business situation and, working online (which is very valuable), simply give a link to an Internet source.

The teacher should make sure that all students understand the conditions of the case study and have an adequate vocabulary relevant to the subject matter. Students should be given enough time to solve the basic tasks of the case study. Practising CSM, one should focus on the students' business communication skills and fluency. Possible problems with language competence should be considered at the end of the lesson, reviewing the most important language errors.

With lower levels of language proficiency, the

lesson may lose its dynamism. If some of the students find the assignment is too complicated, the teacher may intervene in the course of the lesson to ask questions or offer relevant suggestions.

Students should be allowed to arrive at their own conclusions. Often learners believe that there is just one correct answer; the teacher can express his or her opinion and stress the importance of seeking a range of answers and possible outcomes. The teacher should support and highlight the most creative decisions, thus praising students' ability to think independently and outside of the box.

To conclude, the study showed that CSM is highly valuable at various levels of linguistic competence and case studies can be adapted to the level of students' language proficiency to develop communicative skills essential to their future personal and professional success.

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