

Impact of Case Study Method on an ESP Business Course

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Abstract

Business students need to develop skills that require problem solving, critical thinking as well as understanding global businesses since the world has become more integrated and affiliated. Researches in education have already demonstrated that students' active participation in the education process increases their learning and retention. Methods of small group activities, case studies and cooperative student projects give the opportunity to actively participate in the learning process by talking, reading, writing and reflecting. Case-based learning is a core feature of business education since it enables students to discover and develop their unique framework for dealing with business problems. This study explains how an ESP business course at a business school in Turkey, using the case study methodology, helped students to apply their skills on decision making, critical thinking through global business cases as well as improve their English language skills.

Keywords: Business education, ESP (English for Specific Purposes), Global business, Case-based learning, Group work/activities, Improvement of language skills

1. Introduction

Due to the world becoming more integrated and affiliated, the business world has become more demanding. Business students need to develop skills that require problem solving, critical thinking as well as an understanding of global businesses, global markets and customers from around the world. Most companies and organizations require especially business graduates to have a global perspective and an understanding of different cultures (Yamazaki & Kayes, 2004). Research shows that business schools should emphasize synthesis, pushing for a broader educational environment to help students develop decision-making skills that mirror the real world environment of international business (Jain, 2009).

Researches in education have clearly demonstrated that students' active participation in the educational process increases their learning and retention. In an active, collaborative, or cooperative learning environment, students take more responsibility for their own education, and teaching effectiveness increases as the teacher becomes a facilitator and coach rather than a lecturer (Pariseau & Kezim, 2007). Methods such as small group activities, case studies and cooperative student projects give students the opportunity to actively participate in the learning process by talking, reading, writing and reflecting (Meyers & Jones, 1993). Many authors have argued that learning increases when students make use of multiple senses (Kvam, 2000). In respect to these studies, augmenting lectures with group work, in which students discuss material, solve case studies, write written reports, and make presentations, are expected to enhance the learning experience in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) business course.

The use of cases to support a traditional lecture format compels students to deal with course material in a different manner. The case method of instruction is a Socratic approach that took root at the Harvard Business School in the 1920s and has spread to business schools around the world (Spackman & Camacho, 2009). Through cases, students read through the context of real life scenarios, see the full complexity of those situations and apply their own analysis in deriving a solution. (Spackman & Camacho, 2009).

As Cochran (2000) refers to McKeachie (1999), lectures are generally regarded as relatively ineffective means of encouraging students to think about the course material. Cases by nature, enables students to actively think about concepts and as a result leads to significantly higher levels of understanding and rates of retention.

The case method also enables students to discover and develop their own unique framework for approaching, understanding and dealing with business problems.

The case-based learning was particularly chosen for the ESP business course to help improve their language skills through discussing and presenting cases as well as write-up case reports in English.

Case-based learning is now a core feature of business education programs. Researchers and educators in business have used case study methodology in different areas in business courses. For example, in enterprise education (Tunstall & Lynch, 2010) in introductory business courses (Cochran, 2000; Schullery, Reck, & Shullery, 2011), in accounting education (Hassall & Milne, 2004), in business statistics (Pariseau & Kezim, 2007), in business demography (Swanson & Morrison, 2010) and in other business courses (Iqbal, Shaikh, & Nazar, 2010; Jackson, 2003; Johnson & Helms, 2008).

However, it is not widely used in universities in Turkey where medium of instruction is in Turkish language. This is due to the fact that there are limited numbers of Turkish language printed case study books. This problem-based methodology brings difficulties since most case studies are written in English around the world.

2. The Study

This study explains how an ESP business course, using the case study methodology, helped students develop their skills of analyzing global business cases and provide them with a new perspective of different cultures from around the world.

2.1. Context of the Study

The university this study took place in is a well known one in business education in Turkey. The university and faculty have a strong traditional background. All courses with an exception of few are in Turkish. This study is based on the findings of four ESP business courses. The data was collected in two semesters, in spring and fall 2011. Two of the courses were offered in spring 2011, one section for juniors and one section for seniors. The other two courses were offered in fall 2011, again one section for juniors and one section for seniors. The goal of the study was to understand how the course developed the students' understanding of global businesses and culture, and the downfalls of taking the class in English language.

The students who were enrolled in these courses majored in Business Administration. The courses were offered to junior and senior students with a prerequisite to have a score of 80 out of 100 at the universities English proficiency exam. Through semi-structured interviews and an open ended survey at the end of the semester, students were encouraged to provide additional insights into their views and concerns about the mode of learning, especially when cases were presented and discussed in English.

The guide for this study was based on to understand the students' perceptions about case-based learning, especially in terms of benefits, the difficulties they face, and the features they like and dislike as well as to provide suggestions for the course instructor.

2.2 Background of the Case Studies

Business cases vary from focusing on specific tools for analysis to comprehensive strategic decision-making problems. Business cases often require students to use teamwork as well as multidisciplinary approaches to solve business problems. During this process students actively engage in the learning process. When working on the case studies, in all sections of the business course (in spring and fall 2011), the students worked in groups of three to four members.

In the first semester twenty four junior and thirty four senior students were enrolled in the course. Each week the students were asked to read an average of two cases all specifically chosen on a business subject (i.e., On "Global Environment" theme: A shake up at Eastman Kodak and Mc Donald's Corporation in Emerging Markets cases; On "Manager as a Decision Maker" theme: Fed-Ex and DHL cases). By the end of the semester the students read, discussed and analyzed a total of twenty two cases, each two to three pages long. As part of their final grade, the students were asked to form a group, choose a company case of their choice and present it in class. The aim was that they would apply their skills on decision making and critical thinking as well as provide a deeper understanding of the content to their classmates.

In the second semester forty four junior and nineteen senior students enrolled in the course. Different from the first semester the students were asked to read only one case each week because the length of the cases was longer. All were global/international business cases. The intention was to spare more time on, in class, individual as well as group work studies. At the end of each class period the students, individually or as a team had to write a report or answer the given case questions where they had to demonstrate effective writing skills in English language. Class discussion activities in and among small groups were expected to be a motivational factor for the students.

3. Data Analysis

The data analysis was carried out through the qualitative research method. Categories and themes emerged from the collected interview data and open ended survey. Themes were formed by grouping the common responses of the students that implied the same meaning of the core concepts and were grouped under the appropriate category they belonged to.

4. Findings

Based on the data analysis the following common themes and issues emerged from the data. The themes include, Students': 1) skills in English language; 2) ideas on case-based methodology; 3) participation in class; 4) experience in working in groups 5) improvement of English language skills.

4.1. Language Skills

One of the challenges some students faced were their lack of skills in English in understanding the cases. While most felt confident in their ability to understand cases in English they noted that there were at times a lot of unknown words that they had to look up in the dictionary. Below are the statements made by two students explaining this:

Cases were interesting. We learned useful things. This kind of cases must go on. But cases have got a lot unknown words. So I had difficulties to understand. (Junior student)

Some of the cases were difficult to understand and analyze. I wish I could speak better but my English is intermediate level. (Senior student)

On the contrary, some students specifically mentioned that the cases helped them a lot learning new vocabulary. Some stated:

I like the progress in this course. I learn a lot of English words as well as read mostly marketing strategies of big companies or cultural differences. (Junior)

I learned lots of words about the business world. The cases have been very beneficial to us. (Junior)

I think in class we learn a lot about international successful companies with management side and for us it is important, we learn new words, terminologies in English and it is, in my opinion more useful. (Senior)

An important point to note is, since the data have been collected in English, grammar and spelling errors of the students have not been corrected to keep the data authentic.

4.2. Views on cased-based learning

Most students supported the use of cases in business education programs to link theory with practice. The majority also believed that this method of cased-based learning was interesting and fun than traditional lectures. Many acknowledged that studying cases had enhanced their problem-solving and decision making skills and definitely gave them a new perspective of the real business world. Some of the students expressed:

Those cases were helping us a lot in the way of improving our vision and communication skills. If this method of teaching will be continuous, I don't see any obstacle in front of having lectures which depend on fun and bilateral communication (Junior)

We study different cases all this term. And this cases are about business. For example, we learned how some companies or which difficulties come across to enter the different countries. So this informations were very surprise for me. (Senior)

First of all, I learn a lot of things with cases. Especially about different culture. I think cases are very funny and interesting. I learn everything about Starbucks. (Senior)

I believe that the cases given for the class are really helpful. I have learnt lots of new vocabulary and of course improved my management skills. (Junior)

Understanding the class is beneficial with the cases. Because the cases are daily situations and it makes lessons for us very interesting. From the cases I learnt a lot of management premises. (Senior)

Some students pointed out that since there are not many classes that they are able to study cases (due to language barriers in other classes and as noted before there are limited number of Turkish language published case study books) and this mode of learning gave them a chance to use their previously learned theories and practices as well as contributed to other business courses that they are attending. Some noted:

This class benefits to my other classes. For example, I learn when a company enters different country, which a company use strategies. Especially this class benefit “international business policy” class. Because this class and international business policy class have common subjects. (Senior)

This case method is good because we learnt SWOT analysis in our classes and we have no opportunity to make SWOT analysis in other classes. (Senior)

The cases help us both in improving our English and business. Doing the SWOT analysis, entering problems to different countries help me in my other classes as well. (Junior)

I learn lots of information through the cases. Me and my friends used the cases last term for our Turkish business class. The information in the cases is going to be very useful for us in the future. (Junior)

4.3. Participation in case discussions

A number of students found it difficult to participate in case discussions in English. They explained that they could not express themselves fully due to lack of vocabulary and technical terms and found it difficult to translate their ideas into English. They also revealed that they were afraid of making mistakes in front of others and that they did not want to embarrass themselves. The below statements from students exemplify this common fear:

Many of the students have problems in expressing themselves in English which must be a real restriction for the teacher. We should be able to talk and discuss the cases but most students are afraid to talk in class thinking that they would make a mistake. (Senior)

The problem for not speaking is shyness and fear of making mistakes. (Senior)

On an encouraging note, many students indicated that they liked the case discussions in class and they would like to become more participatory in class.

Discussions in class definitely improves me. (Junior)

Discussions in class are very useful, I learn different approaches from my friends. (Junior)

The instructor should enforce us to participate in class, it is useful. In fact the instructor should punish us if we do not. Discussions are very good. (Junior)

4.4. Views on Group work Studies

Although class participations have its advantages and disadvantages, team based/group work studies in class were greatly appreciated by the students. They indicated the advantages of discussing and analyzing the cases among their friends as a supportive merit for learning.

Discussing the cases as groups with our friends is very useful. Sometimes I don't know everything so my group friends help me in that subject. One day I didn't understand the case very well, my friends helped me. I liked it. (Senior)

We work in groups. My friends help me when I am doing something wrong. This helped me a lot. (Junior)

Working in class with my friends together is benefit for me. I want to continue working in the class next term. (Senior)

4.5. Improving English Language Skills

The ESP business course aimed to help and improve the students' oral and writing skills in English. In particular the students noted that the cases were well chosen and writing reports on the cases gave them the opportunity to improve their English. The following students below noted how their English improved by the studied cases:

Cases are useful for us. We learned useful things about business, firms and strategies and also we improved our English. (Senior)

Firstly we learned economical information about some companies by cases. All of the cases were prepared according to the lessons content. This lesson was different from any class I took before. I improved my English reading skills and making analysis about cases. (Junior)

I now have some beneficial information about international companies placed in cases. They helped me use my English skills. While we were making analysis about cases, we used our management skills and we had an opportunity to mix English and management. This lesson has lots of benefits and improved my writing in English. (Junior)

Before this class I was thinking, I don't know English. But with the help of cases, I now can understand English and write. It showed me, I can be better. (Junior)

5. Discussion

The goal of this study was to determine whether that the case-based learning, which is a new format for the students in this study, engaged students and helped them learn. Where the study took place the students noted that their education in the department was not interactive or based on case-based learning. Some have faced a difficult transition as it was their first case-based course, as well as it was in English. They stated that they had problems with discussions due to language barriers that they felt shy or did not want to be embarrassed while they made a point in class. On a positive note, most students expressed that they enjoyed discussions and some even noted that they needed more help and encouragement to be more participative. Another important point of the case-based learning was that it helped the students to apply the business concepts that they learned in other courses.

Students were asked to state what they liked and what could be done to improve the course. Students suggested that this type of engaged learning should continue with studying cases and that they appreciated working in groups, yet to improve the class, asked to discuss daily newspapers and magazines business articles, as well as supportive videos on some cases. Two students stated:

If I need to share some of my recommendation I would say that we could watch a video on a company or business and after that we would evaluate it. (Junior)

We can have articles on current events which is written in the newspaper, or an economic newspaper article. (Junior)

6. Conclusion

The study revealed the benefits of using cased based methodology, group work techniques for the students to be more actively engaged in the learning process.

While the small sample size has limitations to the evaluation still it sheds light on the process at work here. The indication that students felt that the experience was enjoyable, beneficial, delivered knowledge as well as other benefits, added value to their course, would be one they would seek to repeat was a positive outcome and definitely motivates to continue and develop the active learning experience.

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