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## TEACHING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES THROUGH CASE STUDIES: DESIGN, TEACHING, AND EVALUATION

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**Abstract.** *This paper examines the use of the case study approach to teach English for specific purposes (ESP). Cases are used to teach disciplines, such as law, medicine, economics, etc. Nevertheless, they are less common in the areas related to teaching languages. A few articles describe the case study approach to teaching English for specific purposes, and mostly all of them deal with business English. Hence, we explore the advantages of teaching other types of ESP. The paper describes the practical elements that will guide an ESP practitioner through the process of designing their own case study and will offer insights into the teaching particularities of the case study approach.*

**Key words:** *ESP, English for psychology, case study, teaching, modality, innovation*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The case study approach has been in regular use since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Based on socio-constructivist theories, this action-oriented approach relies on the use of real-life cases and requires students to analyse them in order to offer solutions to the problems presented. The approach is used to teach law, medicine, business, economics, marketing, history, and psychology, and others, but it is still viewed as “an innovative method in language teaching” (Fischer et al. 2006; Fischer 2005), and in ESP teaching in particular (Lyu 2022). In ESP, cases are considered a discipline-based methodology (Woodrow 2018) or even an approach complementary to ESP (Anthony 2018). Even though the case study approach is acknowledged as an existing approach to teach ESP, there are very few accounts on the use of case studies in the ESP domain. These accounts, mostly covering the process of teaching business English (Woodrow 2018), do not always provide practical information on how to design cases or on how to teach them in areas other than business English. Therefore, we would like to explore the case study approach in more detail and shed more light on the practical side of its use in an ESP classroom.

The paper is, thus, divided into two main sections. In the first part, the theoretical background of the case study approach will be detailed. This section will provide the definition of the approach, variables, and characteristics used to describe cases, the process of designing a case, the major steps involved in the organisation of students’

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work, and the (dis)advantages of the approach. In the second part, an example of a case study used to teach English for psychology will be described. It will cover the case selection process, the pedagogical adaptations, the teaching process, and students' evaluation of the teaching module.

## 2. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Case studies are considered a teaching approach that prompts students, often working in groups, to analyse a given situation, diagnose it, solve it, and present its analysis in oral and/or written form (Lyu 2021). This approach was used in ancient Greece by philosophers, such as Socrates (Bédard et al. 2005; Gill 2011). More recently, in 1870, case studies were adopted by the Dean of Harvard Law School, Christopher Columbus Langdell, who wished to introduce real-life legal situations into his teaching in order to develop students' critical thinking by applying theoretical concepts to complex situations (Garvin 2003). The success of the approach encouraged Charles Eliot, president of Harvard University, to make a more systematic use of the approach at the newly created faculty – Harvard School of Business Administration (HBS) (Lalancette 2014). A few decades later, in the 1920s, the approach became a teaching strategy at HBS (*ibid.*). Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, case studies were, therefore, employed to teach various disciplines at a tertiary level, including in sociology, psychology, medicine, economics, history, marketing, etc. (*ibid.*).

### 2.1. Definition and Variables of Case Studies

According to Fischer (2005), three variables determine case studies: time, media, and structure. In terms of time, case studies can be decision-making and retrospective: the former incite students to analyse a situation taking place at a present moment, while the latter provide students with an opportunity to examine a situation that has already taken place. In what concerns the media variable, cases can be presented either in a paper format or in an e-format. From a structural point of view, cases can be characterised as open or closed. In open cases, students are not provided with exhaustive information on the case: they are, thus, invited to search for more information relevant to the analysis of the case online; in closed cases, teachers provided all the information necessary for the case analysis.

There are a number of definitions of case studies. After having examined some of them, Lalancette (2014, p. 10) puts forward the following components of a case study definition: (1) there should be a problem to solve, (2) the case should present real facts or be inspired by such, (3) the pedagogical dimension is of crucial importance, and (4) they can be presented in various formats (oral form, written form, closed form, or open form).

### 2.2. Characteristics of Case Studies

Despite a significant number of potential case study characteristics, in this section, we will only focus on the ones that are the most relevant to the particularities of the ESP context.

First, case studies are learner-centred, or student-led, “as students assume some of the responsibility for the direction of class discussion and for their own learning” (Grosse 1988, p. 131-132; Woodrow 2018), thereby making the “learning by doing” principle possible (Bytyqi 2021, p. 775). In the ESP literature, where learners have always been an important factor, one can often find the elements relevant to the learner in one way or

another: “learner needs”/“needs of the learner” (Dudley-Evans & St John 1998, p. 4), “learner’s reason for learning” (Hutchinson & Waters 1987, p. 19), “a learner-centred approach” (González Ramírez 2015, p. 380), etc.

Second, case studies are more often than not authentic both in terms of the materials used (Grosse 1988) and teaching tasks offered to students. As far as the notion of authenticity goes, we would like to highlight its non-binary nature. According to Brown and Menasche (2005, cited in Tatsuki 2006), authenticity should be viewed as a continuum in which genuine authenticity is situated on one end, and inauthenticity on the other, with altered, adapted, and simulated authenticity being in between. If we consider the materials used in case studies, they are often of genuine, altered, or adapted authenticity. In the case of the authenticity of teaching tasks, they simulate the activities of critical analysis and decision-making that students will carry out in their future professional context. In ESP, the notion of authenticity has long since been debated (Hutchinson & Waters 1987; Paltridge & Starfield 2013; Dudley-Evans & St John 1998), and more recent work suggests that the authenticity of teaching materials and tasks positively impacts student motivation (Lyu 2021; Lyu 2022).

Third, language is taught through content (Grosse 1988). This characteristic can be associated with content-based instruction (CBI), which has been gaining in popularity in ESP and EAP teaching contexts owing to its reliance on disciplinary content<sup>1</sup> (Anthony 2018; Lightbown 2017; van Naerssen 2011; Brinton 2003). The case study approach can be characterised as a “hands-on approach to studying a specific subject matter” (Basta 2017, p. 554). As integrating disciplinary content improves student motivation, using case studies is likely to produce benefits concerning ESP learning/teaching.

Finally, case studies represent task-oriented and problem-based learning/teaching (Fischer 2005). According to Anthony (2018, p. 18-19), task-based and problem-based language learning/teaching are two complementary approaches to an ESP approach. Moreover, tasks and problems can be classified as action-oriented, making them particularly compliant with the principles stipulated in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2020).

### 2.3. Design of a Case Study

There are several options when one decides to use the case study approach. The first option consists of selecting an existing case and subsequently in using it in its current form. The second is to use an existing case and adapt it to one’s teaching needs. The third option is to create a customised case.

Given the constraints of existing cases in terms of the topics covered and the objectives set by original case designers, one might first explore the existing cases and then fit them into the teaching curriculum. In the second scenario, one tries to find a case that is suitable for the teaching programme already in place. If no such case can be found, a teacher might consider creating one from scratch.

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<sup>1</sup> Some researchers see CBI as a quasi-equivalent to content and language integrated learning (CLIL) (*cf.* Woodrow 2018; Lightbown 2017; van Naerssen 2011); even though some characteristics of the two approaches are quite similar, it seems to be more appropriate to consider them as two different approaches (*cf.* Anthony 2018). Another element of reflection should be mentioned as well: as the name indicates, the teaching relies on content, but it does not necessarily stipulate that the content should be disciplinary (Anthony 2018).

A few other elements should also be taken into account. It is not advisable to include too much technical information or too many numbers in the case. Instead, one might introduce characters into the case to make it more appealing and engaging to students. Another practicality for a case study designer to take into consideration is to avoid trapping students by providing inexact information or by omitting essential information (Lyu 2021).

#### **2.4. Organisation of Students' Work in a Case Study**

Students' work on a case study usually covers three steps. Hurynovich (NA) describes these steps as follows: (1) individual preparation, (2) small group discussion, and (3) large group or class discussion. Although this work structure reflects the teaching reality quite well, we would like to complete it with the work structure advanced by Daly (2002). Daly also recommends three phases, but in his case, they are (1) case study introduction, (2) case study class, and (3) debriefing the class.

During the first phase, the teacher invites students to read the case together in order to identify lexical or grammatical problems that a case might present, sensitises students to the case study analysis by asking them to identify problems, by setting out clear goals, by precisising criteria to evaluate various solutions, etc., and pre-teaches "the language required to discuss the case study" (Daly 2002, section 1).

The second phase consists of group discussions. Students work in groups of approximately six students to examine a particular aspect of the case study. Then, each group presents its solutions to the other group/groups. Finally, all students in the class get together to discuss the different findings that have arisen from their groupwork in order to express their recommendations on the case (Daly 2002, section 2).

Daly (2002, section 3) states the importance of the debriefing phase during which language issues can be addressed, ways to improve students' transversal<sup>2</sup> skills can be mentioned, and feedback on written output, if students were asked to provide their solutions in written form, can be given.

While these steps and phases are generalisable to a variety of ESP courses, they can be modified and adapted to specific learning/teaching objectives set out by an ESP practitioner.

#### **2.5. Advantages/Disadvantages of Case Studies**

A number of advantages of using case studies to teach ESP can be identified. First, the case study approach, considered an integrated skill approach (Grosse 1988), allows for simultaneous work on several language competences. Students read cases (reading), listen to each other during groupwork (listening), present their arguments/findings/solutions (speaking), often provide a written analysis of a case (writing), and interact with their groupmates and other students (interaction). In addition to language skills, the approach helps students develop skills relevant to learning, such as memory, motivation, curiosity, better attitude towards learning<sup>3</sup> (Boehrer & Linksy 1990; Fischer 2005; Lalancette 2014), and ESP

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<sup>2</sup> Daly (2002) mentions managerial skills, given that his paper deals with teaching business English.

<sup>3</sup> According to Lalancette's analysis (2014) of Beckman (1972) and Van Stappen's (1989) research, the case study approach positively influences students' capacity to retain information, their analytical skills, and their attitudes and behaviour. Moreover, students express their preference for case studies over traditional lectures.

learning in particular. The approach is, thus, beneficial for the improvement of transversal skills: critical and analytical thinking, problem-solving skills, time management, creativity, responsibility taking, etc. (Fischer et al. 2006; Grosse 1988; Lalancette 2014; Thomas 2003). Last but not least, case studies allow students to familiarise themselves with the professional reality they will encounter later on in their careers. Hence, case studies are a key component in the process of student professionalisation, which is one of the most essential objectives of tertiary education, at least in France.

The advantages of case studies seem to be very convincing, so one might ask why the case study approach is not used on a more regular basis by ESP practitioners. The answer to this question is likely due to a few disadvantages associated with the use of the approach.

The first difficulty is finding a case that corresponds to the course objectives and the topic being studied. There are a few databases online, for example *The Case Centre* and *National Science Teaching Association* (NSTA). However, not all cases are available free of charge, and not all the disciplines are present. In addition, cases might quickly lose their relevance and/or novelty if used year after year; thus, cases should regularly be replaced and/or updated (Thomas 2003). If no suitable cases can be found in the existing databases, teachers will need to create their own cases, which is both time- and energy-consuming.

The second disadvantage related to the use of case studies concerns the pedagogical adaptation of the case. The difficulty level of the case should correspond to students' linguistic (Fischer 2005) and disciplinary competences. Accordingly, some modifications may be necessary. A set of preparatory tasks should also be conceived, as well as the tasks to guide students during their work on the case itself.

The last category of difficulties concerns the teaching process. Lesson planning is complicated, especially if a case is long and complex (Woodrow 2018). As the case study approach is student-led, teaching is unpredictable (*ibid.*). Some teachers find it difficult to accept their less traditional role as a guide/moderator/advisor; they often recognise that they lack the specialised knowledge and training to teach through case studies (Lalancette 2014).

Consequently, case study advantages are counterbalanced by disadvantages and vice versa. Nevertheless, in the next section, we shall try to show that designing case studies is an enriching experience for teachers, and working on case studies is motivating for students and, thus, more beneficial in terms of their language acquisition.

### 3. CASE STUDY FOR PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS: DESIGN, TEACHING PROCESS, AND EVALUATION OF THE TEACHING APPROACH

In the final part of the article, we shall explore the teaching context in which the case study approach was used, the process of selecting a case, the pedagogical adaptations we introduced to adapt the case to our teaching needs, and the teaching process itself, as well as the assessment of the teaching module and the case by the students.

#### 3.1. Course Description

The course concerned third-year bachelor and first-year master students in psychology at the University of Liège (Belgium). The students' proficiency in English is very heterogeneous: from A1 to C1 (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). The course was offered to students who had already attended the first two English courses, so

it was designed in their continuation. The usual course structure relies on a set of psychology-related topics. The general objectives the course pursued were to develop students' language skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening, interaction), to improve their transversal skills, to familiarise them with specialised vocabulary, and to sensitise them to the cultural particularities of psychology as practiced in English-speaking countries.

### 3.2. Selection of a Case

As we were about to update our English course, we decided to keep the previously selected topics (psychological disorders, romantic relationships, occupational therapy, memory and memory-related disorders, intelligence, and ethics in psychology), but modify the tasks that accompanied them. Our goal was to introduce more interactive activities and prioritise an action-oriented approach; we achieved this by introducing project-based, problem-based, and case study approaches.

With our topic selection in mind, we explored the existing case studies and found the case study "Are You Blue? What Can You Do? A Case Study on Treatment Options for Depression" by Grossman and colleagues (2002) on the NSTA platform<sup>4</sup>. The case addressed American students in psychology and corresponded to one of our pre-selected topics – psychological disorders. Several documents were (and still are) available on the website: the case itself, five handouts each dealing with a particular treatment of depression (tricyclic antidepressant medications, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, monoamine oxidase inhibitors, St John's wort, and cognitive behavioural therapy<sup>5</sup>), teaching notes, and answer keys<sup>6</sup>.

The authenticity level of the original case study is simulated: in other words, the case was written for the purposes of teaching. However, once used on Belgian psychology students learning English, the authenticity level becomes genuine. For our students, these materials are genuine materials used in the United States to teach psychology to American students. As the teaching objectives pursued by the original class were not the same as ours, certain modifications needed to be made.

### 3.3. Pedagogical Adaptation of the Case

The objectives of our teaching module on depression were developing language and transversal skills, sensitising students to the particularities of the perception, diagnosis, and treatment of depression in different countries/cultures, including the United States, and helping students to acquire a vocabulary related to depression and its treatments.

#### 3.3.1. Designing Preparatory Tasks

Taking into account the fact that students need to acquire (extra)linguistic knowledge in order to analyse and solve the case, the inclusion of a few preparatory activities was necessary in the teaching module before presenting the case. We wished to prepare the students for the cultural differences related to the perception of depression, the criteria

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nsta.org/ncss-case-study/are-you-blue-what-can-you-do#tab-Notes>

<sup>5</sup> Each handout contained the information on pharmacologic/psychological mechanisms of action, indications, dosage and administration, side effects, and costs.

<sup>6</sup> All the documents are free of charge, except the answer keys.

used to diagnose it, the ways patients get help, and the price differences across the globe, with the main focus on the United States.

In order to achieve this objective, we selected a few texts on depression and its general treatments<sup>7</sup> and on types of depression, and subsequently, created a dozen questions that aimed to guide the students through their reading. During this activity, the students would work on the specialised vocabulary in an implicit manner. Then, we designed an analytical activity to allow our students to compare the two tools used to diagnose depression (the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) and the International Classification of Diseases (ICD)) and the diagnostic criteria stipulated in each. The aim of this task was to allow students to discover that the DSM was produced by the American Psychiatric Association and is mostly intended for American professionals, whereas the ICD was designed by the World Health Organisation and is widely used throughout the world, especially in Europe. Next, we created a listening comprehension activity on a TED Talk video<sup>8</sup> on depression, so that the students could associate the previously seen specialised vocabulary with its pronunciation and could critically examine the symptoms described in the video in order to determine whether the DSM or the ICD was used in the video. Finally, we included a short text describing how depression is understood and treated in non-Western parts of the world to raise students' awareness of the treatment differences that exist depending on a patient's cultural background. We added, thus, a few questions on the text for group discussion.

### *3.3.2. Preparing the Case*

As mentioned earlier, the original case was presented in written form, and more precisely in the form of a conversation between five friends who discuss their friend Peggy's psychological condition and who end up thinking that she might suffer from depression. In order to help Peggy, they each decide to find out more information on the available treatments of depression.

In fact, while designing our teaching module, we tried to respect the balancing principle of the four strands advanced by Nation (2007). Indeed, according to Nation, language learning opportunities can be divided into four categories: meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development – and “[e]ach strand should have roughly the same amount of time in a well balanced course that aims to cover both receptive and productive skills” (Nation 2007, p. 7).

Therefore, we decided that students would benefit more from the case if it was presented in a different modality (Sankey, Birch & Gardiner 2010). We hired an American actress, listed on the IMDb platform, and asked her to record a video in which she would present her current situation and her feelings and emotions as if she were talking to her therapist asking for professional help. Given the professional level of her acting, we did not script her text; instead, we asked her to mention the key elements by improvising the rest. The key elements consisted of the ones taken from the original case and the ones we added ourselves: family problems, difficult financial situation, coping with her daily routine, issues with bringing up her son, emotional state, etc. In addition, we asked the actress to record two short feedback videos: one with Peggy's positive reaction to her

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<sup>7</sup> The text length varied from one paragraph to two pages.

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/helen\\_m\\_farrell\\_what\\_is\\_depression?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/helen_m_farrell_what_is_depression?language=en)

therapist's suggestions and the other one where Peggy would be dissatisfied with the therapist's ideas.

The second modification we made concerned the handouts. In order to provide our students with as much (extra)linguistic information on depression as possible, we created a sixth handout on high-tech treatments of depression: transcranial magnetic stimulation, magnetic seizure therapy, deep brain stimulation, vagus nerve stimulation, and electroconvulsive therapy. To ensure coherence with the other handouts, we made sure to include information on treatment side effects and costs.

The last adaptation consisted of modifying the note-taking sheet. The original sheet was in an A4 format and only allowed for a single treatment. We, therefore, wished to make it more comprehensive by including all the six types of treatment on a single page.

### **3.4. Teaching the Case**

The teaching was organised in two three-hour sessions. During the first session, only the work on preparatory tasks was carried out. The structure of the second session was as follows: preparatory tasks, case-related tasks, and class discussion.

Timewise, in the second session, the students worked on preparatory tasks for approximately one hour. During the second step, the students were invited to work on the case; the duration of which was one hour and fifteen minutes. First, they watched Peggy's video and took notes, after which, together with the teacher, the comprehension of all the key elements was verified. Second, the students were divided into groups of five to six<sup>9</sup> to work on the handouts. The jigsaw technique was employed: each student in a group was responsible for one particular type of treatment. After having read the information presented in the handouts, the group members exchanged information with each other and filled in the note-taking sheets. Third, the group discussed the particularities of Peggy's case and tried to decide on the best treatment for her, taking into account the key elements presented in the video. The last step (lasting approximately thirty minutes) was a class discussion during which each group had to present their solutions of the best treatment for Peggy. The students had not only to present their solution(s), but also back it up with appropriate arguments. At the end of the discussion, the video with a happy Peggy would be shown. Even though the students' work was always satisfying, we would also show the video of Peggy's unhappy reaction just to amuse the students.

### **3.4. Evaluation of the Case**

At the end of the teaching module, we invited the students to complete a questionnaire<sup>10</sup> to analyse their attitudes towards the use of the case study approach. We asked them whether they liked the way the module had been taught, whether they thought they had learnt new information from the module, whether they believed that the information they had learnt during the module would be useful to them in the future, and which activity was the most interesting. The survey was carried out in 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 on 280 students in total.

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<sup>9</sup> As there were six treatment types, one of the students in each group (the one who read their handout first) was asked to read a second handout.

<sup>10</sup> We used the Socrative platform ([www.socrative.com](http://www.socrative.com)) to conduct the survey.



The results show that 96% of the students liked the way the module had been taught; 97.5% thought that they had learnt new information from the module; 95.5% estimated that the information they had learnt from the module would be useful to them in the future; 71% expressed their explicit preference for the case study<sup>11</sup>. The results of the two years are consistent, with minor variations.

Table 1 Students' evaluation of the teaching module

Question	2018-2019	2019-2020
I liked the way the module has been taught.	97%	95%
I've learnt new information from the module.	98%	97%
The information I've learnt from the module will be useful to me in the future.	94%	97%
The most interesting activity has been...	75%	67%

Moreover, we received two additional comments, which we believe to be relevant to our analysis. After the class, one student complained about the unethical nature of the case as she thought that we showed a video with a real patient. This remark highlights a high authenticity level and its closeness to a real-life situation.

The other student wrote:

I learn in class that St John's wart is a natural drug against depression. That's a fact and that can be useful in practice. Maybe that's not the objective of the course, but I think that teach something useful for practicing made this class positively different than the others I've already made. In fact, that interested me and gave me wish of improving myself in English<sup>12</sup>.

We can deduce from this comment that making the course content rely on disciplinary knowledge improves students' motivation to study English<sup>13</sup>, and ESP in particular, and learning outcomes as it is widely accepted that enhanced motivation positively influences the learning process (Richards & Schmidt 2010).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The objective of the present paper was to first provide general theoretical information on the case study approach and to, subsequently, offer step-by-step guidelines for ESP practitioners to follow if they decide to employ the approach in their classroom. As we have previously mentioned, designing case studies is a time- and energy-consuming process. However, it offers considerable advantages for ESP teaching. First, it relies on highly authentic materials and contains disciplinary knowledge, which students find extremely engaging. Second, it is accepted as being complementary to the ESP approach, which draws

<sup>11</sup> Even though all the other tasks were related to the case study as they were meant to prepare the students to work on the case, we offered the students the chance to evaluate the preparatory tasks and the tasks directly related to the case in a separate way.

<sup>12</sup> The original grammar and spelling are preserved.

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, several ESP researchers have explored the link between disciplinary knowledge and motivation in the context of ESP teaching and learning (*cf.* Dudley-Evans & St John 1998).

on disciplinary methodologies. Third, it is relatively rarely used in the ESP context, so it is still considered an innovative teaching approach, and students appreciate new and useful approaches to learning. Fourth, it is an integrated approach that allows for simultaneous work on the five language skills and, therefore, respects the principle of a well-balanced course. Fifth, it is particularly well suited for teaching heterogeneous and highly populated groups, which is too often the case in our ESP classrooms, at least in Belgium and France.

We have regularly used the case study approach in different ESP areas for a few years now, and we can state that it has always been evaluated as one of the students' favoured approaches. Indeed, Earl Stevick (1976, cited by Cooke 1995, §35) once said, if students "leave the class with a smile on their faces, learning has taken place". In our experience, the case study approach has always made our students smile.

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