



# A Critical Study on the Effect of the Case-based Teaching Method in Business English Reading in Higher Vocational Colleges

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**Abstract:** The research of teaching methods has been attracting L2 researchers and practitioners, for the proper choice of teaching methods may produce a considerable effect on both languages teaching and learning. Case-based teaching method is now widely applied to many courses, which has been well examined in the existing literature. While there still remains some space worth exploring in the field of ESP teaching, especially in business English teaching, which is scarcely studied by many researchers and teachers. In addition, most of the researchers focus their attention on the secondary or tertiary learners. Similar research has rarely been found as regards the business English learners of higher vocational education institutions, and even more scarcely to probe into the problems in the implementation of case-based teaching method in business English reading. Against such a research background, this study was designed to investigate the effectiveness of the case-based teaching method in business English reading at the higher vocational college level, with a special focus on the identification of the problems in the process of implementing the case-based teaching method. The ultimate goal of the study was to help push forward the necessary pedagogical reforms conducted in higher vocational colleges so that the case-based teaching could be implemented to the desired effect. With the mixed design of quantitative and qualitative approaches, the study comes to the conclusions that despite that a few problems or difficulties were found in the implementation of case-based teaching method from the perspectives of teachers, students and administrators, the method is significantly effective in improving students' enhancement in autonomous learning, cooperative learning and independent thinking.

**Keywords:** Case-Based Teaching, Business English, Reading

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background of the Study

At present, with the rapid development of economic globalization, the depth and width of China's opening up continues to expand. Business activities and economic exchanges are increasingly expanding on the global scale. So, the cultivation of great mount of high comprehensive qualified talents who are excellent both in English proficiency and economy, foreign trade, international business is very important, which is undoubtedly a good thing for business English majors. Thus, great importance is being attached to the specialty of business English.

In 2006, the Ministry of Education issued No. 16 document.

It emphasized that "higher vocational colleges should strengthen the course construction and the course reform to enhance higher vocational students' professional competence." For this reason, the Business English professional settings and development should keep with the trend of socio-economic development so as to meet the demands of the compound talents. Business English reading course in higher vocational colleges is just this kind of course established to conform to this trend. It is not only an extension to English reading, but requires students to grasp relevant business and foreign trade knowledge while doing English reading [2]. In addition, it should comply with high vocational demands and targets of fostering applying talents. In January 2009, the Ministry of Education issued the *Higher Vocational Education English Curriculum Requirements (trial)* (hereinafter referred to as the

CR). According to the CR, the objectives of higher vocational English teaching are as follows: developing students' practical application ability in English, especially in listening and speaking skills; cultivating students' master of effective learning methods and self-learning ability; enhancing students' competitiveness and laying a good foundation for sustainable development in the future [8]. A Teaching method in Higher Vocational English Teaching should reflect the teaching concept of student-centered and the integration of "teaching, studying, doing", paying much attention to the fostering of the students' language application ability. Computer and network technology and other modern teaching means should be actively introduced and employed to the teaching method of the individualized learning and autonomous learning of students. Interaction and cooperation study should be strengthened. Hence, course teaching of business English reading in higher vocational colleges could be understood in the following two aspects: one refers to reading teaching. Teachers educate many reading skills to increase students' reading speed and comprehension ability; the other one refers to business knowledge teaching. Teachers use English language as a medium to teach students business knowledge in the process of business English reading.

But now in the higher vocational English teaching, the theory teaching and practical teaching are separated from each other. Students in China are very deeply influenced by the traditional teaching mode which emphasized on teachers' instruction and old educational idea that the students should absolutely obedient to the teacher. Students are used to passively accepting teachers' arrangements and learn by rote which had become an obstacle in cultivating the innovation spirit and the practical ability of the students. The current rigid teaching method in business English reading teaching which still based on new words, grammar, and pattern drills lead to low levels of the learners' interest and motivation and the unsatisfactory teaching effectiveness. The reform of the teaching method in higher vocational English teaching is imperative. The application of case-based teaching method will attain the objectives that students' structure of knowledge will be optimized and broadened and overall competence will be improved.

### **1.2. Motivations of the Study**

The motivations to do this study were for three reasons: 1) it was the Business English majors' inadequate BE reading comprehension; 2) there were no action research on the application of case-based teaching method to BE reading course, which could provide some empirical evidence concerning case-based teaching method in L2 ESP reading classes; 3) the researcher was much interested in case-based teaching method and BE reading course, and had a great expectations toward the effectiveness of case-based teaching method in BE reading course. The researcher hoped that both the higher vocational BE majors and teachers would profit from this approach in this course.

### **1.3. Significance of the Study**

BE reading course, a branch of ESP courses, has been a focus in the language teaching circle and searching for an effective teaching method to help the BE majors acquire both the language and competence is an immediate challenge facing the researchers and practitioners. The application of case-based teaching method in BE reading course enables BE majors to command not only English language but also provides sufficiently comprehensible and real-life context of business-related information which is of great importance to their future career. Therefore, this study tests and broadens the effectiveness of case-based teaching method and its theoretical foundations in BE reading course and other ESP courses.

As we all know, teaching methods in higher vocational business English teaching are single in nature. Although some teachers are trying to use Interactive Teaching method, task-based teaching and Multimedia Teaching, etc., the problems existing in higher vocational business English teaching are not solved. Case-based teaching method is coming into prominence as a new method and still needed to be improved and perfected. This thesis aims at having an initiate attempt and explore of the effectiveness of the application of case-based teaching method in the teaching of business English teaching. It is assumed that case-based teaching method has the benefit of fostering students' reading and problem-solving ability. In addition, it will improve business English learners' learning attitude, stimulate interest and enhance the ability of independent thinking and cooperative learning. The researcher is also trying to find out the existing problems, if any, in the process of the implementation of the case-based teaching method in the teaching of business English reading at higher vocational colleges. On the basis of these, the study may provide help and inspiration for the teaching of business English reading at higher vocational colleges.

### **1.4. General Description of the Study**

This study was undertaken to investigate the effectiveness of the application of case-based teaching method in the teaching of business English reading at vocational college level, with a special focus on the identification of the problems in the process of implementing the case-based teaching method.

The research questions to be addressed in this study are as follows:

- (1) To what degree is case-based teaching method effective in the teaching of business English reading in vocational colleges?
- (2) What are the possible factors contributing to the effectiveness of case-based teaching method in terms of the business English students' reading ability and practical competence?
- (3) What are the problems, if any, in the process of the implementation of the case-based teaching method in the teaching of business English reading in vocational colleges?

Two research designs were involved in this study. One was experiment and the other was interview. With regard to the experiment, the participants were 70 three-year BE sophomores at School of Foreign Languages, Taizhou University (TZU) and a BE teacher who taught BE reading for more than 8 years and tried to equip herself with theoretical knowledge about case-based teaching method. The instruments employed in this study were two tests (the post-test applied the scores of the reading part of Business English Certificate (Vantage) in January 2018), a self-designed questionnaire and an interview. The data were collected from the questionnaire and analyzed in terms of frequency and percentage. With regard to the interview after the experiment, 6 subjects from the BE classes, stratified into higher-, intermediate- and lower- levels and three other business English reading teachers were chosen. The data were collected by the researcher and data analysis involved categorization and comparison.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Studies in China

In China, the history of application of case-based teaching method is comparatively short. In 1979 after China's industrial and commercial administration delegation visited the United States, case-based teaching method was introduced into our country for the first time. In 1986 the National Economic Committee held the training class for applying case-based teaching in Dalian, and a specialized academic journal *Management Case Method Teaching Research Workshop* came into being. With the constant deepening policies of reform and opening-up, the effectiveness of case-based teaching method has been gradually approved by our educational circles. In 1991, Master of Business Administration (MBA) education is to start in China and case-based teaching developed further in universities. Domestic research on case-based teaching method is mostly in the field of management, law and medicine. The content includes studies of the case's concept and development, case-based teaching and curriculum reform, how to implement case-based teaching in the curriculums in all subjects and the role rehearsal of teachers and students and so on. For example, *Case Method Guidance* by Zheng Jinzhou, *Case-based teaching* by Sun Junye, and *Case Method and Its Role in MBA Education in China* by Zhu Jinsheng mainly emphasize on theoretical research [6].

In recent years case-based teaching method is also used in professional courses of Business English. In term of Intercultural Business Communication course, scholars have published textbooks of case-based teaching method, such as *Intercultural Business Communication Readings and Cases* by Zhuang Enping, *Intercultural Business Communication: Cases and Analyses* by Dou Weilin, *Intercultural Communication: Cases and Analyses* by Liao Huaying and so on. The above books are practical and provide first-hand information for Business English majors and staffs working in

multinational corporations. Case studies reveal the cultural conflicts that exist in business management and communication, and analyze the root causes of cultural conflicts. Someone even offers many ideas and suggestions on how to integrate with different cultures or research projects of United States, Japan and other foreign countries, which is valuable. However, the studies of case-based teaching method in business English reading are still in its infancy.

### 2.2. Studies Abroad

In foreign countries, case-based teaching method can go back to ancient Greek and Roman times. In the fifth century B. C., the growing demand for education called into existence a class of teachers known as sophists. They taught any subject for which there was a popular demand. The sophists tried to entangle, entrap, and confuse their opponent. They sought also to dazzle by means of strange or flowery metaphors, by being clever and smart, rather than earnest and truthful. There are some similarities with case-based teaching method's inner spirit. Socrates, the famous ancient Greek philosophy and educator, mainly adopted the dialog, the discussion and the enlightening educational techniques to ask students questions and revealed the contradiction of their replies. Through this way he guided students to get the general conclusions. Socrates' teaching method is the process of logic reasoning and dialectical thinking. It is essential to cultivate students' independent thinking ability and the skeptical and critical spirit and it also plays an important role in the western education and academic tradition to take shape. In the middle of nineteenth century, teaching method of Five Formal Steps is proposed by T. Ziller and W. Rein and this kind of teaching method has not been systematic until 1869. In 1870 at Harvard University, Professor Christopher Columbus Langdell decided that law students should learn more from analyzing cases than from reading textbooks [11]. Langdell combined cases with Socratic Dialogue (e.g., challenging questions) to teach legal reasoning, compared with written law. Langdell's admirable belief was that properly trained law students should acquire the skill of generalizing from singular cases to other similar legal applications. Most law schools now employ his teaching method--- case-based teaching method. In 1919, the new business school dean at Harvard, Wallace P. Donham, a lawyer and a graduate of Harvard Law School, had extensive experience with the case-based teaching method, so he promoted the case-based teaching method at the 3rd enjoyed great success [4]. In 1920, Rockefeller Foundation funded all kinds of investigations, teaching experiments and compiling of cases. Gradually one systematic procedure was formed from the choosing topics, collecting, writing, applying for patents, updating, issuing to management [9]. In 1930s it was widely used in American universities. In 1960s, the developed countries, such as Britain, France, Germany and Japan also began to adopt the teaching method. In 1986 Carnegie Task Force recommended case-based teaching method in *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century*, and regarded it as a fairly effective teaching mode. A number of scholars such as Lawrence, Lang, Kowalski, Shulman also wrote books to

discuss the application of this method in teaching [5]. Today, in the Harvard Business School over 80 percent of the courses are based on case-based teaching method.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1. Differences in Business-Context English Reading and Problem-Solving Ability Between CC and EC

It has been seen in the pre-test that before the teaching experiment, the business-context reading levels of the students in EC and CC were very close to each other. However, after one-semester teaching experiment, the performance of EC students was better than that of the CC students in business-context English reading and problem-solving ability in the post-test. What's more, the performance of EC students in the post-test was much better than that of in the pre-test. Thus, it can be concluded that case-based teaching in business English reading at Higher Vocational Colleges has some advantages over the traditional teacher-centered approach in improving students' business-context English reading and problem-solving ability. It provides positive support for case-based teaching in business English reading at higher vocational colleges.

#### 3.2. Factors Contributing to the Differences in Business-Context English Reading and Problem-Solving Ability

##### 3.2.1. Students' Motivation

Interest is one of the major elements of motivation and it is a positive response to stimuli based on existing cognitive structures. One way in which intrinsic interest might be achieved is by providing opportunities for communication [3]. Case-based teaching helps to motivate students and stimulate their interest by providing opportunities to interact. Because the content of activities is related to the things and events in the future workplace, students have the feeling that they are in real situations where they take advantage of their cognition, resort to their own life experiences and exchange their ideas in the target language. As a result of the active and free use of the target language, students' potential and wisdom are brought to full play. Following the spirit of humanism, case-based teaching takes into account the learners' affective factors and motives. Learners are often encouraged and praised. They also feel that class atmosphere is harmonious, which helps to make them more confident. In case-based teaching, successful communication will bring learners a sense of success, satisfaction and pleasure, which motivate them intrinsically and in turn stimulate more active participation in activities.

To sum up, case-based teaching in business English reading at higher vocational colleges has some positive effects on students' motivation in English learning, which also helps to enhance students' business-context reading and problem-solving ability.

##### 3.2.2. Learners' Autonomy

The case-based teaching fully embodies the rational of

social constructivism and humanism by aiming to transform the traditional teacher-centered, form-focused teaching method into the learner-centered, meaning-focused one [13]. The case-based teaching attaches importance to individual need analysis, causing students to navigate their own paths to learning and to use their own learning styles and strategies. Their desire for success not only stimulates learner's active performance in class but also encourages learners to make use of various resources to absorb, master and apply knowledge after class. According to their individual needs, they plan, adjust and reflect on their learning, becoming increasingly aware of learning strategies and take greater responsibility for their learning. In this way, case-based teaching activates students' interest and develops their learning autonomy.

In a word, case-based teaching in business English reading at higher vocational colleges is effective in developing learners' autonomy.

##### 3.2.3. Cooperative Learning

Before the experiment, students' responses to EC and CC attain no significant differences in all the five items in the category of cooperative learning. Students have little chance to take part in group work and speak out in classes. They tend to be neutral in terms of cooperative learning.

After the experiment, obviously learners in EC have got much more opportunities to take part in group work and cooperate with each other to fulfill all kinds of tasks and they like cooperative learning which contributes greatly to their English learning.

As can be seen from the analysis of the questionnaire results, most students in EC like to complete the task in the form of pair and group work. Fostering collaborative learning through pair work and group work is one of the strategies used in case-based teaching, which help students to feel less anxiety and more confidence. Pair work or group work creates a more relaxed and non-threatening atmosphere in classroom for optimal learning in which students experience a less competitive learning style to enable them not only to practice what they have already known but also to learn something new from each other.

In a word, case-based teaching in business English reading at higher vocational colleges is effective in cultivating students' cooperative learning.

##### 3.2.4. Independent Thinking

By means of participation in group discussion of classroom teaching and extended case activities after class, most of the students in EC agree that their team spirit has been strengthened, their coordinate and cooperative ability has been enhanced, and their way of thinking has changed from completely absorbing the powerful and authorized theories into critical thinking to some extent.

Based on the analysis of the questionnaire, it can be concluded that most students in case-based business reading class have clear and definite language learning motivations to some extent, they tend to be more autonomous and cooperative, more motivated and confident in English learning, and they have better analytical and independent thinking

abilities, which can greatly contribute to improve the students' business-context English reading and problem-solving ability.

### **3.3. Problems Existing in the Implementation of Case-Based Teaching**

#### **3.3.1. Problems Coming from Teachers' Factors**

Case-based teaching needs teachers' higher teaching ability. The teacher, in a case-based teaching approach, needs to command a significantly wider range of skills. They include: (1) an ability to select proper cases for activities; (2) the competence to organize pre-and post-case activities appropriately; (3) a willingness to adapt question difficultness during the actual problem-solving phase; (4) a sensitivity to individual differences and the capacity to adapt tasks to take account of differences in learner orientation. But, due to all kinds of reasons, there exist some problems in teachers themselves in the process of the implementation of case-based teaching.

##### **(i) Teachers' Inadequate Explanation of Grammar and Vocabulary**

In this experiment, in order to avoid the boredom for English of the students, the researcher tried to reduce the use of the traditional teacher-centered, grammar-translation method, and teach them relatively small grammar and vocabulary. The researcher paid more attention to problem solving in the whole teaching process.

Corey [1] pointed out that because of the limitation of the standard time, case-based teaching can't give learners with enough language input. Due to English as a foreign language, our country is lack of ideal language environment, so meaning and form should be considered together while implementing case-based teaching. Teachers should not only pay attention to the authenticity of the case, but also provide opportunity for use of some of the language structure consciously. Therefore, in the process of implementation of the case-based teaching, the related grammar and vocabulary teaching in before-case and after-case should be enhanced, especially in higher vocational business English class, because most of higher vocational college students have weak English foundation. Through adequate explanation of grammar and vocabulary, students can have an overall understanding of the case, and therefore a thorough analysis of the case would be made.

##### **(ii) Teachers' over Reliance on Case-Based Teaching**

In the experiment, case-based teaching is effective in improving students' ability of independent thinking and problem solving. However, Case-based teaching is not the substitute for traditional teaching. The reason is that only when the students have a good reserve of basic business knowledge can they be able to analyze the case and do the tasks [10]. Therefore, the role of case-based teaching could not be exaggerated, which is the distillation of what the students learnt in class and a major supplement to traditional teaching. And as things stand now, that supplement is indispensable to business English reading.

#### **3.3.2. Problems Coming from Students' Factors**

In case-based teaching, learners must take responsibility for their own learning, developing autonomy and skills in learning how-to-learn [14]. So we can say that learners themselves decide whether they can succeed or not in their English learning. The questionnaires and the students' interview demonstrated that most students had positive attitudes towards case-based teaching. However, some students expressed their anxieties for case-based teaching. On the basis of interviews, the researcher made a summary about some negative factors from learners themselves.

##### **(i) Uneven Class Participation**

In the teaching experiment, the teacher has to design many case-related activities for students to discuss and participate. However, the students' participation was not balanced in the teaching experiment process: some students were initiative, but some students were negative for the activities, even just "looking". Thus, uneven class participation limited the development of students' independent thinking and problem-solving ability. Some students are inactive in participating class activities and the class is too big (35 students) for all the students to express themselves. Case-based learning requires that learners adopt the roles relatively different from the roles in the traditional teaching methods and they should be adaptable, creative, inventive, and independent. However, many students are used to teacher-central teaching method and very dependent on teachers. So when these students are required to finish some activities by themselves, they don't want to participate in them and some even show resistance to them. Obviously, influenced by the traditional teaching methods, these students could not adapt to the roles they should play in case-based teaching, they are lack of consciousness of active learning.

In addition, the number of students is so big that not every student has the chance to present his ideas. Therefore, uneven class participation impedes students' development of analytical ability.

##### **(ii) Different Levels of English Proficiency**

One of the biggest problems the researcher faced in the implementation of case-based teaching was that students were at different levels in the same class—several students had high-level English proficiency; some with middle-level English proficiency; and some only just getting started. In this case, the students with high-level English proficiency are able to carry out a wider range of activities on different topics and they may need less time on pre-case presentation, drills of language items and complete assigned cases more quickly; on the contrary, a part of students even cannot fulfill the tasks. Thus, triggering the initiative of all the students with different English levels proficiency is a difficult but urgent task for teachers [12].

#### **3.3.3. Problems Coming from the Teaching Environmental Factors**

In addition to teachers' and students' factors, environmental factors also restrict the implementation of case-based teaching,

which includes traditional assessment system and lack of case base.

#### **(i) Traditional Assessment System**

Case-based teaching presents challenges in all areas of the curriculum, especially in the area of assessment. Now English teaching quality is still assessed by students' scores in the basically grammar-based examinations in our institute. For example, CET (College English Test) 4 & 6 and final exams both belong to grammar-based examinations, excluding oral exam, and the learners must participate in the two exams. So in the experiment, although the researcher took the formative assessment as the dominant factor (accounting for 60%) according to the performance of which students usually do in various teaching activities with a summarizing evaluation--the final exam (accounting for 40%) as a powerful complement for formative assessment, there were still some students who did not pay much attention to oral practice.

Obviously, in this case, for some students, getting high scores in exams has become a very important goal. So the exams ignoring the language communication not only have influenced the implementation of case-based teaching, but also have impeded the reading and problem-solving ability development of business English learners. Therefore it needs all sides' common efforts building a comprehensive, performance-based assessment system.

#### **(ii) Lack of Case Base**

In this experiment, the researcher needs a large number of cases to implement case-based teaching in business English reading. However, there isn't a standard and adequate case base for her to choose from, which becomes a big obstacle to case-based teaching [7]. It brings many disadvantages to business English teaching.

The lack of case base impedes the implementation of case-based teaching. However, the implementation of case-based teaching and the accumulation of cases will help to relieve this problem. The more cases you apply, the larger case bank you'll establish.

In short, the problems existing in the implementation of case-based teaching are discussed in this part from the three aspects: teachers' factors, students' factors, and teaching environmental factors. They are: (1) The teacher neglects the grammar, vocabulary teaching in the process of case-based teaching; (2) The teacher cannot neglect the role of traditional teaching in the implementation of case-based teaching; (3) Students' class participation is uneven; (4) The students' different English level cause the difficulty in the selection of cases; (5) It exists contradiction between the traditional English assessment system and task-based language teaching methods; (6) Lack of case base influences the effects of the implementation case-based teaching.

## **4. Conclusion**

### **4.1. Major Findings**

Firstly, case-based teaching is significantly effective in

improving students' reading ability and practical competence. As indicated in the results of independent-samples T-test based on the scores of the post-tests, a significant difference was found between and EC and CC, which suggests that EC performed generally better than CC after the treatment of the case-based teaching method, at the level of 0.003 which is much lower than 0.05.

Secondly, the possible factors contributing to the effectiveness of case-based teaching are students' enhancement in autonomous learning, cooperative learning and independent thinking. The results yielded from the questionnaires reveal that there are significant differences between EC and CC in the various aspects of their autonomous learning, cooperative learning and independent thinking except for learning motivations held by both EC and CC, suggesting that the case-based teaching method implemented in EC was found more effective in comparison with the traditional teaching method employed in CC. It should be noted that EC was found to make a noticeably greater progress in cooperative learning as in the active participation in group activities ( $P = 0.00$ ), and in independent thinking as in the enhancement of team spirit, analytical and problem-solving ability ( $P = 0.00$ ).

Thirdly, the problems existing in the implementation of case-based teaching can be seen from the results of the interviews, which show that, while the case-based teaching method proved to be apparently effective in the teaching of business English reading, quite a few problems or difficulties were found in the implementation of case-based teaching method, which can be summarized from the perspectives of teachers, students and administrators: (1) A good combination of traditional teaching and case-based teaching must be made in business English reading class. (2) In the context of business English teaching in higher vocational colleges, the cases selected in the teaching of business English reading may hardly meet the requirements of all the population of students, considering that part of vocational students are oblivious of low development of language proficiency and active learning in the case-based teaching class. (3) The current assessment of business English teaching and learning stay mismatched with the teaching objectives inherent in the implementation of the case-based teaching. In addition, the lack of case base worsens the desired effect that the case-based teaching method should otherwise produce.

### **4.2. Pedagogical Implications**

From the teachers' perspective, when implementing the case-based teaching method should take into consideration the lexica-grammatical teaching. The teacher should combine the traditional teaching and case-based teaching in order to enlarge students' basic business and language knowledge as well as their reading and problem-solving ability [15].

From the perspective of the learners, the biggest difficulty they are expected to overcome is to adapt themselves to the teaching and learning of business English so as to develop their ability of cooperative learning and independent thinking.

From the administrators' point of view, the case-based

teaching method calls for its corresponding business English testing system and the establishment of adequate and specialized case bases, and places emphasis on the development of the learners' communicative and problem-solving effectiveness in workplaces, so that the effectiveness of the case-based teaching method, would be achieved to the full extent.

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