



CASE-BASED LEARNING IN A PUBLIC SPEAKING COURSE: PERCEPTIONS OF EFL STUDENTS AND INSTRUCTORS IN VIETNAM

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Abstract. This qualitative research study investigates the perceptions of instructors and students about the use of case-based learning (CBL) in an English public speaking course in Vietnam. The study involved three instructors who implemented the CBL method and 84 third year EFL students who were exposed to various cases during the course. Data were collected through teachers' materials, teaching journals, and interviews and students' learning journals, reflective reports, and focus group interviews. The findings from the instructors suggest that CBL enhances involvement, critical thinking, problem-solving, and public speaking skills among students. Most of the students reported that CBL improved their confidence and skill in delivering English speeches and highlighted that the approach allowed them to develop their critical thinking and apply their knowledge to real-life situations. However, the study also notes several challenges, including the time and effort required to create appropriate scenarios, potential limitations in students' language proficiency, and the need for ongoing instructor support for facilitating this method effectively. Overall, these findings suggest that CBL can be a valuable pedagogical method for teaching English speaking courses in Vietnamese universities. The study proposes providing further support and resources for successful implementation of CBL in English speaking courses.

Keywords: Case-based learning, critical thinking, public speaking, EFL instructors, EFL students

1. Introduction

In recent years, case-based learning (CBL) has gained increasing attention in higher education as a teaching method that emphasizes student engagement, critical thinking, and

collaborative learning (Williams, 2004). Typically, in CBL, instructors assign students cases related to potential real-world problems they might face in their future profession and guide them to analyze the cases. The interactive process of exploring these cases helps students to develop a deeper understanding of the issues and skills required to solve them. Harvard Business School introduced the case study method more than 70 years ago, which has since become widely popular in many fields such as law, medicine, clinical health, civil engineering, physical education, and business, among others (Marcus, Taylor, & Ellis, 2004; Newson & Delatte, 2011; Richards, Hemphill, Templin, & Eubank, 2012; Williams, 2004). Although CBL has been used in various teaching areas, its effectiveness in foreign language teaching, specifically in English, remains somewhat unexplored. Given the lack of research in this topic, the current study was set out to investigate the perceptions of the instructors who use CBL in their English communication skills course and EFL undergraduate students regarding the effectiveness of the CBL approach in improving English public speaking skills in a Vietnamese university. By examining the perceptions of both the instructors and the students, this study hopes to contribute to the literature on the effectiveness of CBL in the EFL context and help facilitate more effective teaching practices in EFL education.

2. Literature Review

The CBL method is considered as an effective way to enhance critical thinking, problem-solving and reflective practice, particularly in various fields such as law, medicine, clinical health, and business (Hemphill, Richards, Gaudreault, & Templin, 2015; Lee, Lee, Liu, Bonk, & Magjuka, 2009; Rovegno & Dolly, 2006; Williams, 2004). The underlying mechanism of CBL is to prepare students for real-world problem-solving scenarios they may encounter in their future professions (Hemphill et al., 2015), by immersing students in interactive and collaborative case discussions (Carlson & Schodt, 1995; Veal & Taylor, 1995), which is a reflective way of learning. CBL allows students to integrate their prior experiences with theoretical knowledge, enabling them to analyze cases and develop solutions (Carlson & Schodt, 1995; Harrington & Garrison, 1992). CBL provides a safe environment for students to learn from the actions of characters portrayed in cases without facing negative consequences for making mistakes in the real world (Veal & Taylor, 1995). Moreover, in a study on how EFL students perceived learning skills in a language assessment course that utilized CBL and project-based learning, the implementation of CBL is found to emphasize learning skills such as cognitive abilities, critical thinking, and communication (Norawati & Puspitasari, 2022).

A variety of studies have reported students' positive attitudes towards CBL, describing it as an effective and beneficial teaching method (e.g. Beck, 2007; Carlson & Schodt, 1995;

Kleinfeld, 1992). However, limited research focuses on instructors' perceptions of CBL. Jackson's (2004) study in Hong Kong found that despite the potential benefits of CBL, instructors experienced challenges when using cases in their courses, such as students' reluctance to participate in the discussions involving the cases provided. Esteban and Canado (2004) recommended other strategies such as students' motivations, authenticity of materials, appropriate assessment measures, and objectives achieved in the case as key factors for the success of CBL. Additionally, proper preparation and use of cases in the syllabus were highlighted, as well as the learners' involvement in activities for the effective application of CBL method (Esteban & Canado, 2004). Conducting research of this nature has the potential to improve the content and language support classes for instructors who wish to incorporate student-centered activities like CBL in their curriculum. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the perceptions of both instructors and students on the effectiveness of CBL as a teaching method in courses of English public speaking skill in Vietnam.

3. Research Methodology

The study utilized a qualitative research design, with data collected through students' journals, reflective reports, and focus group interviews and instructors' teaching materials, teaching journals, and interviews.

3.1. *Participants and setting*

In this study, there were two groups of participants. The first consists of 84 EFL undergraduate students (76 females, 8 males) taking the third-year public speaking course at a Vietnamese university. These students were part of the same cohort and had taken several courses together in a program on English Language Studies. At the beginning of the course, the researcher informed the students of the study and assured them that their participation or non-participation would not affect their grades in any way. The researcher emphasized that the students could withdraw from the study at any time, and data analysis would not commence until final grades were assigned. All students agreed to sign the informed consent form and none withdrew from the study before completion. The second group of participants in this study were three female EFL instructors at a Vietnamese university who had over 20-year teaching experience. These instructors implemented the CBL method in their English public speaking course, which was a component of the university program on English Language Studies and English Language Teaching, with the aim of engaging students in critical thinking and developing their communication skills. Using the case writing process outlined in the guide by Harvard Graduate School of Education (Noonan & Bookin, 2017), they carefully considered

the backgrounds, future professions, academic strengths and weaknesses of the potentially enrolled students in preparing communication scenarios and case support materials such as accompanying questions and evaluation criteria before the semester began. The instructors employed various CBL class activities, which included small and whole group discussions, role plays, simulations, and problem-solving presentations. They utilized a list of cases to teach in the English public speaking course that spanned a 15-week semester and consisted of a 110-minute session once a week.

3.2. *Course description*

The current study involved a compulsory public speaking course in the program on English language studies. The course lasted for 15 weeks and had a weekly session of 110 minutes. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the course was conducted entirely online. The course employed the CBL method, aiming to stimulate critical thinking skills among students when preparing speeches. Throughout the semester, students were taught various public speaking techniques as provided in the “Public speaking” course textbook and were assigned four cases to work on, including one for a group speech and three for individual speeches. These cases were carefully crafted by instructors to cover a wide range of issues related to students' studying and living experiences.

3.3. *Data collection*

The data from the group of student participants were gathered throughout the course using various methods such as journaling, reflective reports, and focus group interviews. The journal component involved online discussions where students critically analyzed the given cases and prepared their speeches. The students also shared their comments and experiences after delivering their speeches. All of the journal responses were collected and analyzed at the end of the semester. Additionally, the students were given a Google form for a reflective report to provide feedback on their learning experience, including the benefits and drawbacks of the CBL method in the course. These reports were compiled and analyzed qualitatively. Students were also given the opportunity to participate in a focus group interview, with 21 participants who were selected and contacted after receiving their grades. The interview, lasting around 100 minutes, followed a semi-structured format via Zoom, with Zoom's automatic recording function and verbatim transcription for subsequent analysis.

The study also collected the data from the group of instructor participants through various methods, including analyzing teaching materials and teaching journals, and conducting interviews. The instructors provided copies of their course description, cases, case support materials, and teaching journals. These materials were carefully analyzed to understand the

strategies used by the instructors in employing cases, their implementation of class activities, and any challenges they encountered. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on the instructors' perceptions of using cases in the course, specific challenges faced, and adjustments made in teaching with cases. The interviews, which lasted approximately one hour each, allowed the instructors to share their perspectives on other case-based teaching topics they deemed important. Furthermore, the interview questions were occasionally modified during the interview to gain a deeper understanding of the instructors' concerns.

3.4. *Data analysis and trustworthiness*

This study employed the inductive analysis and constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to analyze the collected data. The data sources were symbolized with abbreviations, including E for student journal entry, L for instructor journal entry after each lesson, RR for reflective report, GI for group interview, InIn for interview of instructor, and research participants were coded with S for student and I for instructor. Two separate coding schemes were used by the researchers to analyze student responses from journals, reflective reports, and interview transcripts in order to identify emerging themes. The researchers then compared their independent findings and had discussions to establish a common set of themes, which are presented in the results section of the paper. To facilitate the organization and storage of themes, NVivo 9.0 (QSR International, 2010), a qualitative data management tool, was utilized.

In order to enhance the credibility of the results, trustworthiness techniques were employed. Firstly, data triangulation was employed by using multiple sources of data, including journals, reflective reports, and focus group interviews. Secondly, researcher triangulation was established by involving different researchers who independently coded the data and then came together to discuss and create the final set of themes.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. *EFL students' perceptions of CBL in public speaking course*

The analysis of multiple data sources including student journals, reflective reports, and focus group interviews indicates that the students responded positively towards CBL, as they found it to be a more engaging and interactive approach when compared to the traditional lecture-based method of instruction. This finding is corroborated by the following quotes from the students' journal entries and ideas from their reflective reports and interviews:

"The class today really held my attention. I enjoyed working on the case as a team and seeing how we each approached the problem in different ways to prepare for our speech. It made the learning experience so much more interactive and engaging." (S6, E4)

"The cases provided were relevant and engaging, and they helped me to think critically about what I should prepare for my speeches. I also enjoyed the group discussions that followed each case, which allowed me to learn from my peers and share my own insights." (RR12)

"The public speaking class was very interactive and engaging. Instead of simply memorizing techniques from lectures, we actively discuss and analyze cases that relate to real-life situations. This not only helps us gain a deeper understanding of case details but also encourages us to be more critical in our thinking. We feel more connected to our group, as we collaborate to find the best solutions and prepare our speeches together." (GI1)

This is consistent with the findings of Hemphill et al. (2015), who discovered similar patterns in pre-service teachers' attitudes towards CBL implementation in a physical education teacher education program. . This similarity may come from the fact that CBL in combination with group work facilitates students' interaction and collaboration since the students in both studies worked in group to discuss the cases. The results of this study also indicate that the opportunity to engage in peer discussions and interact with instructors promoted a deeper level of learning among students. The participants acknowledged that CBL can be a valuable pedagogical tool in public speaking courses for its applicability in real-world scenarios, fostering connections between foundational principles and enhancing their critical thinking abilities.

The students also acknowledged that the carefully designed CBL activities can help them learn effectively. They appreciated the opportunities provided by the CBL approach to refine their analytical and communication skills. Additionally, they reported an increase in their confidence when delivering English public speeches as a result of their engagement in CBL. They also recognized that CBL enabled them to apply the knowledge gained in class to practical real-life situations. These findings are consistent with previous research that highlights the ability of CBL to enhance student engagement and deepen learning in higher education settings (Lee et al., 2009). The advantages of utilizing CBL in a public speaking course are evident in this study, as it allows EFL students to cultivate a comprehensive understanding of how to effectively apply public speaking skills in real-world contexts. Consequently, this can enhance their critical thinking abilities and boosts their confidence levels in delivering English speeches, equipping them for the challenges they may face when presenting speeches in their future workplace.

In addition to the advantages that CBL offers students, some limitations were highlighted by the EFL students in their journals, reflective reports, and focus group interviews. These drawbacks primarily revolve around their low language proficiency, heavy reliance on prior experiences, and limited understanding of cultural contexts. The language barriers they face can impede their active participation in class discussions and the analysis of case studies. EFL students may encounter challenges in conveying intricate nuances of meaning and expressing complex ideas. This finding is corroborated by the following quote from a student reflective report:

"When I analyzed the scenario carefully, I had a lot of ideas, but I couldn't express all the aspects I thought of in English, so I chose to say it simply" (RR52).

Furthermore, it is worth noting that EFL students may heavily depend on their personal past experiences or the absence of such experiences when it comes to analyzing cases. This reliance tends to restrict their capacity to think beyond their own experiences, thus hindering the development of new perspectives, as stated in the following quotes from students' reflective report and journal:

"This situation requires me to have a lot of experience to share in the speech. But I only know a little bit and have not participated in many activities, so the content shared is not very deep" (RR27).

"In the discussion today, my group was analyzing a case study on cross-cultural communication. It was difficult for me to think beyond my own perspective and consider alternative viewpoints as I kept recalling my own personal experiences and how I have encountered similar situations in the past." (S8, E5)

Additionally, EFL students' limited understanding of cultural contexts can affect their competence in analyzing cases based on the principles covered in class. As a result, this may potentially restrict their progress in speech development. This concern was explicitly expressed by one student in their reflective report:

"I have never had direct contact with American students, so in the scenario where I give a speech to share my university learning experiences with them, I can only say what I think is necessary. I am afraid that American friends may need other information" (RR14).

4.2. EFL instructors' perceptions of CBL in public speaking course

The results obtained from the analysis of teaching materials, teaching journals, and interviews with the instructors demonstrate the effectiveness of CBL as a teaching method that promotes deeper student engagement and critical thinking, which ultimately contributes to

better public speaking skills. This aligns with Esteban and Canado's (2004) ideas about the advantages of CBL in their study on business English teachers. The findings indicate that CBL is a more effective teaching method than traditional lecture-based teaching methods. According to the instructors, CBL encourages students to actively participate in the learning process, leading to improved speaking skills. Moreover, the analysis of teaching journals reveals that CBL-based teaching promotes active involvement from students and encourages engagement through productive discussions, debates, and collaborative problem-solving. These insights are supported by the instructors' journal entries, as depicted in the following quotations:

"In today's CBL lesson, the students were asked to analyze a real-world case in pairs and then present their findings to the class. I was amazed at how engaged and enthusiastic they were during their presentations. Not only did they demonstrate a profound understanding of the material, but they also engaged in a lively debate about the best solution to the problem. I could see the students take ownership of the learning process, and their desire to understand the content was obvious." (I1, L7)

"During today's CBL activity, students were given a case study on cross-cultural communication challenges. They eagerly shared their perspectives and engaged in critical analysis of different solutions. They collaborated in groups to analyze the case, identify potential cultural barriers, and propose effective strategies. The impact of CBL on student engagement and critical thinking skills was quite evident." (I3, L10)

"Today's CBL session was particularly inspiring. The students were enthusiastic and invested in the analysis of a compelling case. I noticed that they were asking questions more frequently and discussing different solutions, demonstrating a willingness to take risks and venture beyond their comfort zones. The CBL method has brought out the best in my students, and I'm continually impressed by their progress and desire to learn." (I3, L6)

The analysis of the interview data consistently supports the notion put forth by the instructors that CBL can motivate and engage EFL students through the provision of engaging and relevant materials for analysis and discussion. As EFL students develop a deeper understanding of real-life scenarios, they are more likely to feel a sense of enthusiasm towards utilizing their English communication skills, since they recognize the practical applications of their language learning.

The second significant advantage of the CBL method acknowledged by the instructors is its ability to cultivate critical thinking skills among EFL students. By engaging students in the analysis of real-world problems, developing strategies and solutions, and evaluating potential outcomes, the CBL activities effectively enable students to practice and enhance the critical

thinking skills that are vital for success in their future professions. The instructors provided insightful elaborations in their journals, as outlined below:

"Today's cases on environmental issues sparked a lively discussion among the students. They eagerly shared their perspectives and engaged in critical analysis of different solutions. It was inspiring to witness the students actively discussing and applying critical thinking skills to evaluate the potential impact of each solution on environmental issues. It was clear that CBL effectively promotes deeper student engagement and critical thinking, leading to students' improved speaking skills." (I1, L3)

"Using CBL today was a game-changer for our class. The students were able to analyze a real-world issue, formulate strategies and evaluate the potential outcomes. I noticed an increase in the students' critical thinking skills, they were able to identify essential details and evaluate potential implications. CBL can positively impact EFL students' critical thinking skills, which helps prepare them well for the jobs in the near future." (I1, L12)

"Students were given the task requiring them to analyze a real-life situation during today's CBL session. I was pleased to observe that the students broke the scenario down into parts before proceeding to develop potential solutions. They also asked relevant questions, worked in groups and discussed trade-offs for each solution. The process indicated a high level of critical thinking, which made me believe that the CBL method is an effective way of building students' critical thinking skills." (I2, L7)

"Today's CBL session was intense, and I noticed that the students were actively engaged in the analysis of the case given. Throughout the process, the students were required to research, analyze and develop optimal solutions. They demonstrated their ability to apply knowledge to solve problems, revise solutions and communicate their thought process. The experience has convinced me that CBL can have a significant impact on developing students' critical thinking skills, thus preparing them for future success." (I3, L11)

The third advantage of CBL highlighted by the instructors is its role in fostering the development of communication skills, confidence, and motivation among EFL students in their English language interactions with group members. This is achieved through the cases in which the students were engaged in in-depth discussions and encouraged to present their group work to the class. Such activities provide valuable opportunities for EFL students to practice conversation, negotiate meaning, and express their ideas in English. The following journal entries effectively illustrate the instructors' perspectives on this advantageous aspect:

"Today's CBL lesson was a great success in terms of fostering communication skills. Students worked in groups, engaged in discussion and presented their findings to the class. The process

allowed the students to practice conversation, negotiate meaning, and express their ideas in English. CBL is an excellent tool for providing EFL students with opportunities to develop and enhance their communication skills and confidence.” (I1, L3)

“During today’s CBL session, the students had the opportunity to analyze a real-life situation and present their findings to the class. The session was heavily communication-oriented, and students engaged in discussion throughout. I noticed that the students worked on sentence structure, vocabulary, and pronunciation as they presented their findings. CBL actually increases EFL students’ confidence in expressing their ideas in English in a supportive environment.” (I2, L6)

“Throughout the CBL session today, the students were required to work in groups to analyze a real-life situation and present their findings to the class. I was impressed with how engaged they were during the discussion, negotiating meaning and expressing their thoughts in English. The session provided ample opportunities for students to practice and refine their communication skills, which are vital for their success in the future. CBL enhances EFL students’ language proficiency while promoting an interactive and participatory learning environment.” (I3, L4)

The instructors' experiences resonate with Grosse's (1988) observation regarding the integrated skills approach facilitated by CBL in language teaching. This approach provides students with the opportunity to practice reading, speaking, listening, and writing skills. Small and large group discussions, role plays, simulations, and problem-solving tasks are widely employed to enhance English communication skills. By centering around the analysis of real-life situations, these activities further foster the development of critical reasoning skills. Particularly, the CBL method enables students to explore intricate scenarios, examine multiple approaches to problem-solving, and take appropriate action.

Another advantage of employing the CBL method, as highlighted by the instructors during the interviews, pertains to the development of the students' intercultural competence. They emphasized that CBL offers EFL students valuable opportunities to engage in discussions and evaluate the viewpoints of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds while analyzing culture-related scenarios. This not only enables them to expand their knowledge and understanding of other cultures but also enhances their ability to navigate cross-cultural communication practices. One interview excerpt effectively elucidates this aspect of intercultural competence development as follows:

“Through cases on intercultural communication, students were challenged to evaluate cultural differences and approach them with open-mindedness and sensitivity. This facilitated active discussion and improved cultural understanding. The lively debates that followed enhanced their critical thinking abilities and helped them articulate their thoughts with clarity. The students’

ability to think critically about intercultural interactions improved significantly, and CBL undoubtedly contributes to better language communication skills.” (InIn2)

In addition to the advantages, the instructors pointed out several challenges associated with implementing the CBL method in a public speaking course for EFL students. One primary challenge lies in the considerable amount of time and effort required to create relevant scenarios or cases that allow students to apply their language skills in a meaningful way. Moreover, potential limitations in students' language proficiency can impede their ability to fully engage with the case and utilize the necessary language skills. Students' difficulty in comprehending the case details and participating actively in discussions may pose additional challenges for the instructors to overcome. Thus, the instructors must strike a delicate balance between offering sufficient guidance and fostering independent student exploration. Lastly, successful implementation of CBL requires ongoing support for instructors. This support includes access to necessary resources and training to facilitate case design, provide constructive feedback, and evaluate student progress.

5. Recommendations

The study indicates that implementing the CBL method in public speaking courses, particularly for EFL students, is an effective teaching approach. The findings indicate that well-designed and carefully managed CBL activities can enrich students' learning experience, enhance their critical thinking abilities, boost their confidence, and bridge the gap between theory and practice. Given the positive perception expressed by the students towards CBL, it is recommended that instructors in EFL programs consider incorporating this method into their courses.

However, the study highlights some challenges that EFL students may encounter in the CBL public speaking course. These identified drawbacks underscore the importance of careful design in CBL activities to address language barriers and ensure that scenarios are relevant to EFL students. Instructors should consider diversifying case scenarios to include various cultural perspectives and providing appropriate support for students who may struggle with cultural knowledge. Employing collaborative techniques such as peer and instructor feedback can help mitigate some of these challenges.

Based on the data from the instructors in this study, it is recommended that EFL instructors adopt CBL as a teaching method in public speaking courses. CBL has proven to be effective in promoting deeper student engagement, critical thinking, and improved public speaking skills. To maximize the benefits of CBL, instructors need to devote careful attention to

designing suitable scenarios or cases that allow students to apply their language skills meaningfully. However, this may require meticulous planning and manageable tasks. Instructors may also need to provide additional support to students who face difficulties in understanding certain aspects of the case to prepare for their public speeches. On the other hand, it is crucial to provide ongoing support for instructors to effectively facilitate this method, which may include training and access to necessary resources.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study shows that the use of CBL in a public speaking course proves to be an effective method for enhancing EFL students' critical thinking abilities and confidence in delivering English speeches. Multiple data sources, including journals, reflective reports, and focus group interviews, indicate that the students generally perceive CBL positively. They recognize it as a valuable technique that facilitates their acquisition of practical skills in the public speaking course. However, this study also identifies certain challenges EFL students encountered in the CBL public speaking course, such as their lower language proficiency, tendency to rely heavily on past experiences, and limited understanding of diverse cultural contexts. These challenges can be addressed by instructors through adaptations and careful design of CBL activities, providing appropriate support to EFL students.

Furthermore, the instructors' perceptions of using the CBL method in communication courses for EFL students are generally positive. CBL is recognized as an effective approach for fostering student engagement, confidence, critical thinking, language communication skills, and intercultural competence among EFL students. Despite challenges such as the time-consuming nature of case development and students' limited language proficiency, the advantages of employing CBL outweigh these obstacles. By incorporating CBL into their teaching practices, EFL instructors can create a dynamic and effective learning environment that provides students with opportunities to enhance their language skills, critical thinking abilities, and understanding of diverse cultures and the world around them in a meaningful manner.

The study's findings suggest the need for further research to examine the benefits and limitations of CBL among EFL students in other courses of the English language studies program, especially its impact on student engagement and the development of advanced skills such as critical thinking.

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