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EMPLOYING INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS CASES FOR BUSINESS LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

INTRODUCTION

This article presents the development of the pilot material for business language instruction adapting the case method. In recent years, the case method has been a focus of interest for application in business language instruction (Abbott and Watson 3). It was originally developed at Harvard Business School and has been one of the most utilized teaching methods in business schools across the USA. It involves active learning and a discussion-oriented approach through which students are guided not only to acquire business skills, such as analytical, critical thinking and creative skills, but also to develop communication skills so that they can work effectively in the group process (Barnes et al. 34–43; Ginter). The case method can be effectively applied for business language instruction because, as Fangyuan Yuan states, “. . . a real-world business case is more concrete than abstract, more authentic than artificial, and intermingled with rich information about the target business culture, it can be used as an effective springboard for language teaching and learning” (15). In the business language classroom, it is essential to include both business culture content and language components for effective instruction (Grosse and Voght; Kumayama), and many case studies of curriculum development with this mission have been reported (Moroishi-Wei; Six; Takami; Tanihara and Kuriyama). In the global age of business today, it is more critical than ever for business language educators to help learners not only improve language abilities but also develop intercultural competency. Employing the case method in the language curriculum offers the opportunity to teach both language and business content, including business culture.

However, as with any other materials, the case method in the language curriculum requires careful planning and integration of language and content, with both language learning and content-based activities in a coherent structure (Omaggio-Hadley). Case studies for business language classes, for example, should not be employed in the same way as in business schools, since the level of language and content are different in the two settings (Yuan). It is evident that learners in the business language class are using the case as a tool mainly for learning language and only secondarily for learning content,

whereas the students in business school are using the case for its content, with little or no emphasis on language learning. Accordingly, for business language instruction, it would be suitable to adapt the content of business cases in order to accommodate the students' language levels and to provide language learning tasks and activities based on the principles of language pedagogy theory.

An adapted case method is represented in the pilot material to be discussed here. Designed to both improve language proficiency and promote the understanding of cross-cultural issues, this material was created for the intermediate level Japanese for Professions class offered at the University of Pennsylvania, for which I was the instructor. This material was created collaboratively by a business content developer and a language pedagogy developer. For the purpose of promoting students' understanding of cross-cultural issues, international business case studies were employed so that they would offer real-world examples of how companies adjust their business styles and systems when they engage in international business. Language pedagogy, including the theory of Proficiency Oriented Instruction and Task Based Language Teaching, was incorporated to support the principles and framework of the material. ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) Guidelines were used to set up the objectives of tasks and criteria of learners' language performance.

Five learning units were completed, each of which contains a different business case. Each unit presents one main business case story, accompanied by various language learning tasks and activities provided within the Processing, Production, and Interaction (PPI) framework developed by David Nunan. Centered on learning about a business case story, this framework includes not only activities that focus on linguistic elements, but also tasks that elicit communicative interactions and simulate real-world professional communication.

Development of this pilot material is an ongoing project. This preliminary report discusses the (1) material development, (2) theoretical framework, (3) structure of a learning unit, (4) implementation of the pilot material, and (5) further studies of this project.

PRELIMINARY PROCESS OF MATERIAL DEVELOPMENT

Collaboration between Content and Language-Pedagogy Developers

The development of this material was a collaborative effort between a business content developer and a language pedagogy developer. The business content

developer was an MBA student in the Wharton Business School. She was familiar with the case method and had worked as a consultant in the Tokyo branch of a major American consulting firm prior to coming to Wharton. In the meantime, I focused on my role as the pedagogy developer. Since I was also the instructor of the course, I understood the objectives of language learning, language learning background, and language proficiency of the students. The collaboration made it possible to draw on expertise from the areas of content and language. Indeed, collaboration between content and language experts to develop curriculum and/or materials is increasingly common in Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) and Content-Based Instruction (CBI), with many successful outcomes previously reported (Shaw; Ryding and Stowasser). When dealing with complicated and highly technical content in language instruction, such collaboration is considered productive and efficient.

Business Case Selection

The selection of topics for the business cases was made while taking the students' interests into consideration. Business case stories focused on inter-cultural and international examples in order to promote students' cross-cultural business awareness; specifically, we used Japanese companies with operations in America, and American companies with operations in Japan. The stories of how American and Japanese companies adjusted and changed their business styles, conventions, strategies, and systems in the foreign country provided students with primary and in-depth information to promote their knowledge of cross-cultural issues.

Five learning units were created: Coca-Cola in Japan, Toyota Nummi Factory in the USA, Wal-Mart in Japan, Nintendo in the USA, and Coach in Japan. An attempt was made to choose relatively well known companies to spark learner's interest and to cover different kinds of industries and business aspects (Appendix 1).

Procedures

The material development procedure had two phases, with the first being content development. The business-content developer did research on a company and wrote a business case story, which included the main story, background information about the company and its industry. The target learners of the material were not necessarily business majors; the students who enrolled in the Japanese for Professions class were a mixed group, mainly coming from the School of Arts and Sciences, the School of Engineering, and the Business School. Accordingly, it was crucial that the content of the business cases be understandable to all these students.

Upon completing the content development, the draft was adapted for language pedagogical purposes. The language level of the business case story was adjusted, although the core information was mostly maintained. The content was further simplified to ensure that students with language levels insufficient to grasp the abstract and highly technical matters would also understand. I also created various tasks and activities that centered on the business case using principles of language pedagogy theory.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

The main theoretical frameworks of language learning adopted for the material development are Proficiency Oriented Instruction and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). Generally, learners in a business language class want to improve their language ability for use in the real professional world. Proficiency Oriented Instruction is suitable for such students, since it specifies the outcomes in light of real-world language functions and performance. In addition, it provides the opportunity to practice language in a wide range of contexts and tasks that are likely to be encountered in the real world.

The material provides numerous tasks and activities centered on language output, since students in the class are particularly interested in improving their speaking proficiency, which they think is the most important skill required in professional settings. However, expecting the same level of language performance as a native speaker seems unrealistic and unfair for intermediate-level language learners. Therefore, in order to set up more plausible objectives for tasks and criteria for learner's output, ACTFL OPI Guidelines were employed. The ACTFL OPI Guidelines categorize language ability into novice, intermediate, advanced, and superior levels according to four major assessment criteria: global tasks and functions, context and content, accuracy, and text type. The guidelines identify what the learner can and cannot do with language at each proficiency level. Specifically, students in the class were intermediate-mid or high level in the ACTFL scale¹ and therefore, the objective was to turn intermediate language performers, who can engage in simple conversations on topics of personal interest and create separate sentences, into advanced performers who can give narration and description coherently, with topics of both personal and general interest, in the form of paragraphs.

¹ I am a certified ACTFL OPI tester in Japanese. I had conducted oral interviews with the students in the modified fashion of ACTFL OPI for pedagogical purposes for several years and used the results to match the course material to their proficiency level.

Table 1 shows the assessment of criteria of speaking for Intermediate and Advanced levels in the ACTFL OPI Guidelines (31).

TABLE 1
ASSESSMENT CRITERIA OF SPEAKING
IN ACTFL OPI GUIDELINES

Proficiency Level	Global Tasks and Functions	Content / Context	Accuracy	Text Type
Advanced	Narrate and describe in major time frames and deal effectively with an unanticipated complication.	Most informal and some formal settings/ <i>Topics of personal and general interest.</i>	Understood without difficulty by speakers unaccustomed to dealing with non-native speakers.	Paragraphs
Intermediate	Create with language, initiate, maintain, and bring to a close simple conversations by asking and responding to simple questions.	Some informal settings and a limited number of transactional situations / <i>Predictable, familiar topics related to daily activities.</i>	Understood, with some repetition, by speakers accustomed to dealing with non-native speakers	Discrete sentences

The TBLT framework was incorporated to embody Proficiency Oriented Instruction. Yuan suggests that the case study be treated as a “language learning task,” and in this way, the case study fits well within the framework of TBLT. TBLT supports the notion of learning language by using it, and integrates a focus on form within the communicative language teaching approach. It provides pedagogical tasks, defined by Nunan as classroom work “. . . that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or

interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form” (4). Moreover, pedagogical tasks provide the opportunity to simulate the real-world operations of language use and communication. Experts (Nunan; Long 1985, qtd. in Ellis) advocate the use of TBLT in LSP and CBI classrooms.

While I integrated the fundamentals of Proficiency Oriented Instruction and TBLT (Omaggio-Hadley; Ellis; Nunan; Heilenman and Kaplan), I emphasized five principles in the framework and in the material: (1) Scaffolding, (2) Active learning, (3) Focus on form(s), (4) Communicative interaction, and (5) Task dependency. A brief explanation of each follows:

(1) Scaffolding: The material provides a structure within which learning progresses in gradual steps. At the beginning of the learning process, the expected language performance that learners produce is what they can do with their current language capacity, referring to the speaking criteria of the intermediate level in the ACTFL OPI Guidelines. Then, the learning process challenges the learners to use their language in the tasks and activities that demand the next level of proficiency in the ACTFL OPI Guidelines.

(2) Active Learning: The material provides the opportunity to learn the language by using the language. Various tasks provide different contexts, contents, and functions that the learners will encounter in professional settings using the target language.

(3) Focusing on Form(s): The development of accuracy is one of the key aspects of improving language proficiency. Explicit form instruction and form(s)-focused activities are provided.

(4) Communicative Interaction: The material provides an opportunity for learners to create and use their language holistically and meaningfully in communicative interaction.

(5) Task Dependency: Tasks within a unit build upon the previous ones. They are graduated with the notion of scaffolding. As for task continuity and sequences, the Processing, Production, and Interaction (PPI) framework developed by Nunan was adopted. In the beginning of the instructional sequence, learners are engaged in a comprehension phase, followed by the controlled productive phase focusing on linguistic elements, and finally creative and communicative language use in the last phase.

STRUCTURE OF A LEARNING UNIT

Each unit is approximately twenty pages long, composed of one main business case story accompanied by various tasks and activities (Appendix 2).

The structure of a learning unit has three phases: Processing, Production, and Interaction (Nunan).

Processing: The Processing phase involves preparation for and reading the business case. This phase starts with a warm-up conversation with topics relating to the business case and tasks centering on schema-building. In this stage, the topics are designed to be of personal interest, with open-ended questions, so that speakers at an intermediate speaking proficiency can produce language relatively easily. Schema-building for the business case provides background information with a few key words. The information relating to the business case is usually presented in a visual format such as tables, graphs, and pictures to reduce task difficulty. Data comprehension tasks simulate those that the learners are likely to perform in the business settings with relatively less language demanded. After those preparations, learners read a business case in the absence of any time pressure. In order to help the students' understanding of the business case and build reading proficiency, tasks such as reading comprehension questions requiring skimming and/or scanning and fill-in-the-blank questions requiring the extraction of specific information, are offered.

Production: The Production phase provides controlled activities and exercises, focusing on linguistics elements. Explicit explanations of the new grammar are offered for reference. Various vocabulary exercises are used such as matching new vocabulary with its definitions or antonyms, and filling in new vocabulary in an incomplete sentence. The various grammar activities include completing given sentences and dialogues, and making sentences using the target items. Also included are questions about the business case and summaries of each paragraph with key vocabulary and grammatical items. These tasks are designed to bridge the learner's understanding of the business case and their language production using the key vocabulary and new grammar patterns.

Interaction: The interaction phase provides authentic communicative interaction. The tasks are not intended to elicit a particular grammatical structure, but are intended to help learners use language resources in order to complete the task. In this stage, tasks including information-gap, jigsaw, problem-solving, and decision-making elicit communicative and meaningful interactions. Conversation topics are related to the business case of the unit, which repeats the topics of the warm-up conversation at the beginning of the unit. However, in this phase, activities are scaffolded in a way that helps learners achieve advanced language performance, with topics of more general interest along with text type forming a paragraph. The

questions asked often require the learners to describe, explain, and narrate the given topics.

IMPLEMENTATION

Class and Students

The intermediate Japanese for Professions class at the University of Pennsylvania piloted the material in the Fall 2006 and Spring 2007 semesters. This class was equivalent to a fourth-year Japanese class. It met for two hours twice a week. The number of students was fifteen in the Fall and seven in the Spring, with learners of many different majors and academic disciplines: the School of Arts and Science, the Business School, the School of Engineering, and the Law School. Their language learning backgrounds and levels varied. On the first day of the class in the Fall of 2006, an informal placement test was conducted. It was a surprise test meant to see if the students understood and remembered the vocabulary, Chinese characters, and grammar that they learned in previous courses. Table 2 shows the results of the placement test. The test scores were widely distributed, indicating that the students' achievement of language learning varied tremendously.

TABLE 2
THE RESULT OF THE PLACEMENT TEST

Test score	30–40	40–50	50–60	60–70	70–80	80–90	90–100
# of students	2	2	4	1	4	0	1

Note: One student gave up taking the test because it was too difficult for her.

Class Procedures

Although the time spent for each unit varied, the average was approximately 6–8 hours per unit. The typical procedure for implementation began with the Processing phase. In the first meeting, the class engaged in pair work for warm-up conversation and schema-building activities. Reading the business case and answering the reading comprehension questions were assigned as homework so each student could read and understand the business case without any time pressure.

The second meeting focused on the Production phase. The class read the business case aloud, while checking for the proper reading of Chinese characters and the right answers to the reading comprehension questions. After that, the class engaged in activities focusing on linguistic elements and production activities by giving summaries of paragraphs in the business case and answering questions about it.

The third and fourth meetings focused on the Interaction phase. Before proceeding to the Interaction phase, however, a written quiz with vocabulary, grammar, and true-false reading comprehension questions from the business case was given so the students were relatively familiar with the newly learned vocabulary and grammar in the communicative tasks. After the quiz, students engaged in the communicative tasks, very often in pairs or a group. After completing the unit, an oral exam was given to assess students' speaking skills. The oral exam took a proficiency-oriented approach and asked the students to answer questions by explaining, narrating, and describing the business case.

Result of the Survey

At the end of each learning unit, a questionnaire was given to the students in order to examine how they perceived the material. The students most frequently used these words to describe their learning experiences using the pilot material: "interesting," "fun," "useful," and "difficult /challenging."

The students were asked to rate the effectiveness of the overall unit using a five-point scale: 1 (not effective at all) to 5 (very effective). The average rating of the five units was 4.44: 4.26 for Coca-Cola Japan, 4.0 for Toyota, 4.8 Wal-Mart, 4.71 for Nintendo, and 4.42 for Coach.

The students were asked to make comments on one thing they liked and one thing that they did not like about the material. Their favorable comments referred to both content and language learning. They said that they liked learning about a real business case, learning business-related vocabulary, and the interaction and conversation that they had in tasks and activities. Their unfavorable comments concerned mostly the language level and language learning aspects such as "too much difficult vocabulary," "too difficult Chinese characters," and "not much practice on grammar."

A question was asked as to what could be improved. A few students suggested that the material include more exercises on linguistic elements. Other students suggested that less time could be spent on similar activities in the Processing phase. Others suggested the class use visual aids such as video

and PowerPoint. The suggestions the students provided were valuable and they indicated there was room to improve the material further. However, some aspects, especially about the difficulty of the language level in the material, might not be easily changed, considering that these opinions came from one or two students, while the majority of the students thought it appropriate. Since the students' language achievement levels varied widely, it would be extremely difficult to make material that perfectly matched the language levels of all the students in the class.

FURTHER STUDIES

Although we received positive feedback from the students in the class, the pilot project was only a preliminary effort. Improvement of the material is urgent, and expansion of the learning units is necessary for more effective and efficient instruction. Specifically, two items are important.

(1) Re-examining and revising the material by incorporating the theory of learning culture: The content of the material created focuses on international business cases, in other words, business case studies of how American and Japanese companies adjusted and changed their business styles, conventions, and systems in the foreign country. By choosing companies with such conditions, we intuitively judged that providing an international business case would offer information about international and cross-cultural business and help learners acquire knowledge about it. However, this does not necessarily mean that it promotes students' cross-cultural understanding and intercultural competence. It is necessary to re-examine the learning units and revise them for more effective instruction by incorporating the theory of learning cultural and cross-cultural issues.

(2) Expanding material with supplemental learning tools using technology: It would be more effective to develop a technology-based learning tool (website) to accompany the material to enhance both language and culture teaching and learning. By using such technology, the material can be archived, added, and updated efficiently, which makes the latest and expanded material instantly available to students. For language learning, we will include supplemental language tasks and activities, explanations and detailed commentary of business technical terms, *realia* such as newspaper and Internet articles related to the business cases, and audio versions of the cases recorded at a native speaker's speed. Cultural learning will include visual aids to accompany the business case, *realia* such as photos, pictures, and supplemental information relating to, and expanding on, the business case story.

CONCLUSION

This article discussed the development of the pilot material employing the case method for intermediate-level Business Japanese. The pilot material employed international business cases and incorporated the language pedagogy of Proficiency Oriented Instruction and Task Based Language Teaching. The material comprised several learning units, which took the form of the Processing, Production, and Interaction framework proposed by Nunan. The material is currently in the testing phase in a Business Japanese course at the University of Pennsylvania. Student surveys revealed that the students perceived that the material was fairly effective for both language and content learning. Although the result from student surveys is only a preliminary indicator of the effectiveness of this project, it seems that the material yielded an effective framework for business language instruction and a springboard for teaching both language and content, including cross-cultural issues for business purposes.

The article also recognizes the shortcomings of the pilot material and proposes further studies for improvement and expansion of the material for more effective instruction, i.e., (1) incorporating the theory of learning culture and developing intercultural competence, and (2) creating supplemental materials using technology. The results of these further studies will be reported in the near future.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

SUMMARY OF THE FIVE CASES AND THEIR CONTENTS

Case	Content	
Coca-Cola Japan	Industry: Topics:	Beverage - Globalization and Localization - Developing and launching a new product in Japan - Marketing, branding
Toyota's Nummi Factory in USA	Industry: Topics:	Automobile - Human resource management - Using the Toyota production system in USA
Wal-Mart in Japan	Industry: Topics:	Retail (supermarket) - Wal-Mart's philosophy and strategy for success - Advancement in Japan - Business merger and take-over - Japanese market vs. Wal-Mart philosophy (Japanese consumer's taste, lifestyle [shopping style], and trend)
Nintendo in USA	Industry: Topics:	Game, entertainment - History of Nintendo - Advancement in USA - Marketing and licensing strategy - Nintendo vs. Sony Playstation
Coach in Japan	Industry: Topics:	Apparel, accessories, and luxury goods - History and marketing strategies of Coach - Advancement in Japan - Luxury market in Japan (Japanese consumer's taste, lifestyle, and trend) - Louis Vuitton vs. Coach

APPENDIX 2

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE LEARNING UNIT
(COCA-COLA JAPAN UNIT AS A SAMPLE)

Stages (PPI)	Tasks/activities	Example
<Stage 1> Processing	Warm-up conversation	Name what drinks they like and tell on what occasions they drink them.
	Questions and answers about a graph	Identify the amount of sales of Coca-Cola according to the regions in the world and discuss what they learned from the data.
	Questions and answers about a graph	Identify the best-selling drink type (2nd, 3rd) in Japan from a graph, and discuss what they learned from the data.
	Questions and answers about a picture	Look at pictures of Coca-Cola products sold in Japan and identify which ones are and aren't sold in the US. Sort several products according to type of drinks (soda, milk product, etc. . . .)
	Business case story	
	New vocabulary list	
	List of Chinese characters	
	Reading comprehension questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Answer True or False to statements about the business case. - Fill in the blanks to complete sentences about the business case.

APPENDIX 2 (CONT.)

Stages (PPI)	Tasks/activities	Example
<Stage 2> Production	Target grammar/ expression (rules, example sentences)	
	Vocabulary exercise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Match vocabulary with its definition or match vocabulary and its antonym. - Choose vocabulary to complete the sentence.
	Grammar exercise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Complete the sentences using the target grammar. - Complete dialogues using the target grammar.
	Questions and answers about the business case story	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Give a summary of each paragraph. - Answer the reading comprehension questions using the key vocabulary and grammar (The instructions include the suggestion to create their own language in a paragraph text type, explanation- and narration-type of answer).

APPENDIX 2 (CONT.)

Stages (PPI)	Tasks/activities	Example
<Stage 3> Interaction	Jigsaw task	<p>The students form a group of four students with each student receiving a different piece (one paragraph) of a story about a new Coca-Cola Japan product “Qoo.” The students are not allowed to read the piece to each other, but must give a summary and explanation in their own words. The group decides on the order of the four pieces to complete the story.</p>
	Decision-making task	<p>Suppose the students are working in Coca-Cola USA. Discuss in the group whether or not they would sell Coca-Cola Japan products (canned coffee, green tea, soy milk) in the USA, and make a decision.</p> <p>(Discussion tips—How is the market in the USA? Are there similar products sold already? If not, will the product be accepted in the US market? What are the merits and risks of selling the product? If the group decides to sell the product, what would be a good business strategy?)</p>
	Discussion (conversation)	<p>Discuss the following topics: How are the American and Japanese soft drink markets different? Talk about any issues related to soft drinks and the industry (such as recycling cans and bins, issues of soda intake and children’s health).</p>

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