

EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CASE-BASED LEARNING IN AN ENGLISH PUBLIC SPEAKING COURSE

Tran Quang Ngoc Thuy

University of Foreign Languages and Internatinal Studies, Hue University

✉ tqnthuy@hueuni.edu.vn

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Abstract: This article reports on a study that investigated EFL undergraduate students' perceptions of the effectiveness of case-based learning in an English public speaking course at a Vietnamese university. The students were exposed to various cases over the course and were required to analyze and prepare for their public speeches in English. Data were collected through student journals, reflective reports, and focus group interviews. The results indicated that the use of case-based learning made the class engaging and interactive and was effective in improving students' critical thinking and confidence in delivering English public speeches. The students also reported that the method allowed them to apply their knowledge to real-life situations. These findings suggest that case-based learning can be a valuable pedagogical method for teaching English public speaking courses in Vietnamese universities and may potentially be adopted in other educational contexts to improve students' critical thinking and communication skills.

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

1. Introduction

Case-based learning (CBL), also known as the case method or case study, is a pedagogical method that uses real or hypothetical situations to facilitate student learning (Jiménez Raya & Vieira, 2015; Snyder & McWilliam, 1999). In this method, the instructor assigns students cases related to possible problems they may face in their future professions, and guides them in the analysis of these cases. The use of CBL in the classroom has the advantage of providing students with a collaborative setting to generate and discuss ideas, evaluate potential outcomes based on collective experience and knowledge, and encourage critical thinking, awareness, and empathy (Snyder & McWilliam, 1999). Harvard Business School first introduced the case study method more than 70 years ago to teach postgraduate students how to analyze real or simulated business dilemmas, and since then, it has become widely used in business curricula around the world (Erskine, Leenders, & Mauffette-Leenders, 1998). The method has been applied to various teaching areas, including civil engineering (Newson & Delatte, 2011), physical education (Hemphill, Richards, Gaudreault, & Templin, 2015), and language teaching (Jiménez Raya & Vieira, 2015). Despite the widespread use of CBL across various fields, its effectiveness in foreign language teaching, particularly in English, remains under-investigated. Thus, this study aims to contribute to the field by exploring the perceptions of EFL undergraduate students regarding the efficacy of CBL in an English public speaking course at a Vietnamese university. Specifically, it tries to address the following research question:

What do Vietnamese EFL undergraduate students think about the use of the CBL method in a public speaking course?

2. Literature review

CBL has emerged as a popular alternative to traditional lecture-based instructional methods in many fields, including law, medicine, clinical health, and business (Williams, 2004). CBL is designed to prepare students for real-world problem-solving scenarios that they are likely to encounter after graduation, helping them to develop the necessary skills and experiences for success in their chosen professions. To achieve these goals, CBL involves the creation of cases for educational purposes, which students explore interactively to discuss and debate issues dynamically.

Various studies have highlighted several benefits of CBL, including the application of theoretical knowledge to real contexts, critical reasoning about complex situations, and the development of self-knowledge and reflective practice (Lee, Lee, Liu, Bonk, & Magjuka, 2009; Williams, 2004). CBL also allows students to integrate their prior experiences in analyzing cases and developing solutions, thus enhancing their critical and analytical reasoning skills and problem-solving processes (Hemphill et al., 2015). CBL can be a bridge for integrating knowledge from previous learning experiences and help to connect theory to practice (Carlson & Schodt, 1995). Additionally, 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).

Due to the student-centered nature of CBL, it is essential to consider students' perceptions and experiences of this method. Various studies have indicated that students positively perceive CBL as effective and helpful for their learning. Kleinfeld's (1992) study found that students expressed positive attitudes toward case study lessons, but there was no significant difference in student attitudes between case study and other teaching methods. Carlson and Schodt (1995) applied CBL to an economic theory course and found that students perceived positively that the cases contributed to their learning. Norawati and Puspitasari (2022) investigated EFL students' perception of the learning skills functioned in a language assessment course implementing CBL and project-based learning and found out that cognitive, critical thinking and communication skills were learning skills that functioned in the implementation of CBL.

There are several research gaps that provide a strong rationale for conducting a study on Vietnamese EFL undergraduate students' perceptions of the effectiveness of CBL in an English public speaking course. Firstly, while CBL has been widely researched in various fields, few studies have explored its effectiveness in the context of EFL public speaking courses specifically aimed at undergraduate students. Secondly, in the context of English language teaching in Vietnam, where students often struggle to develop their speaking skills due to the lack of opportunities to practice speaking if the traditional teacher-centered method to teaching is used, alternative pedagogical methods such as CBL need to be explored. Thus, a study focusing on EFL undergraduate students in this context can contribute to understanding how this method can be applied to improve speaking skills and engage students in the learning process. Finally, understanding students' perceptions of CBL in public speaking courses can provide valuable insights into how this teaching technique can be refined and improved to better meet student needs and interests. This can ultimately inform the design of more effective language teaching materials and strategies in the future.

3. Research methodology

The study utilized a qualitative research design, combining the approaches of thematic, content and constant comparative analysis to extract meaningful insights and themes from data collected through student journals, reflective reports, and focus group interviews.

3.1 Participants and setting

In this study, 84 EFL undergraduate students (76 female, 8 male) taking the third-year public speaking course at a Vietnamese university were recruited as participants. 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 about 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.

3.2 Course description

In the present study, the public speaking course was a mandatory component of the program on English language studies, running for 15 weeks, with a 110-minute session once a week, providing students with techniques and skills to practice delivering speeches. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the course was administered entirely online. The course used the CBL method with the aim of engaging students in critical thinking when preparing speeches. Throughout the semester, the students received instruction on public speaking skills and were given four cases, including one for a group speech and three for individual speeches (see the Appendix). These cases were meticulously drafted by three instructors involved in a CBL project to provide an extensive overview of issues that concerned the students' experiences in studying and living; the students were allowed to add more description of the speech audience in each case. In a non-CBL public speaking course, students were given topics to prepare their speeches, without specific details of the cases as provided in this course.

3.3 Data collection

This qualitative study gathered data throughout the duration of the course via the use of journal, reflective report, and focus group interview. The journal component involved online discussion questions prompting students to critically analyze the cases given and prepare their speeches. After delivering their speeches, students shared comments on analyzing cases and their speech experiences. All of the students' responses in the journals were compiled for qualitative document analysis at the end of the semester. For the reflective report, at the end of the semester, the students were given a Google form to provide feedback on their learning experience, while also indicating the benefits and drawbacks of CBL in the course. All student reports were compiled for qualitative document analysis, and those willing to participate in a focus group interview could leave their contact details for subsequent scheduling. The focus group interview, conducted after the students received their grades, hosted 21 participants and lasted roughly 100 minutes. It paralleled aspects of the reflective report and followed a semi-structured format via Zoom, using Zoom's automatic recording function and verbatim transcription for subsequent analysis.

3.4 Data analysis and trustworthiness

This study utilized inductive analysis and the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to analyze data. The researchers used two independent coding schemes to analyze student responses from journals, reflective reports, and interview transcripts to identify emerging themes. The two researchers then discussed their independent findings to develop a common set of themes, which are presented in the results section of the paper. NVivo 9.0 (QSR International, 2010), a qualitative data management tool, was used to organize and store the themes.

To enhance the credibility of the results, trustworthiness techniques were employed. Firstly, data were triangulated using multiple sources, including journals, reflective reports, and focus group interviews. Secondly, researcher triangulation was established by having three different researchers who designed the cases for the public speaking course independently code and then discuss the data to create the final set of themes.

4. Findings and discussion

The findings from the analysis of multiple data sources, including student journals, reflective reports, and focus group interviews, show that the students' perception of CBL was overwhelmingly positive. The most salient findings of the use of CBL method in the public speaking course were reported in this article. Most of the students found the CBL method to be engaging and interactive, particularly when compared to the more traditional lecture format of learning. This aligns with Hemphill et al.'s (2015) findings in their study on pre-service teachers' perspectives of CBL in physical education teacher education. The opportunity to discuss cases with their peers and instructors promoted a deeper level of learning, which they found beneficial. This finding is corroborated by the following quotes from the students' journal entries:

"In today's class we worked in our group to analyze and discuss the situation for the group speech. It was a lot more engaging than just sitting through a lecture. I appreciated the chance to interact with my classmates and work through the problem together." (S3, E5)

"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 way we worked through the situation and discussed our ideas was much more interesting than just listening to a lecture. I think this method is a really effective way of getting us students more involved in our learning." (S11, E5)

"I don't like classes where the teacher just talks to you for an hour, so it was refreshing to have a more interactive learning experience today. The situation kept me engaged, and I enjoyed being able to work with my group member to come up with solutions to the case. It definitely beats just sitting and listening." (S16, E4)

The students acknowledged that CBL can be a critical teaching and learning technique in a public speaking course, as it allows them to apply knowledge to real-world situations, connect with learned concepts and principles, and enhance their critical thinking skills.

Through the reflective report and focus group interviews, the students acknowledged that carefully designed and managed CBL activities can help them learn effectively. They appreciated the opportunity to hone their analytical and communication skills through the CBL approach. They reported feeling more confident in their ability to deliver English public speeches, and that

CBL allowed them to transfer knowledge obtained in class for practical use. These findings align with previous research that has shown that CBL can enhance students' engagement and deepen learning in a higher education context (Lee et al., 2009). The benefits of CBL in a public speaking course are clearly seen in this study, as EFL students can develop a richer understanding of how to apply public speaking skills in real-life situations, enhance their critical thinking and confidence in delivering English speeches, and feel more prepared for the challenges of delivering speeches in their future workplace.

Apart from the benefits CBL might bring about for the students, some drawbacks EFL students pointed out in the journals, reflective reports, and focus group interviews relate to their low language competence, over-reliance on past experiences, and limited knowledge of cultural contexts when preparing for the public speeches in the course. Language barriers can hinder EFL students' effective engagement in class discussions and analysis of cases. They may have difficulty expressing subtle nuances of meaning and 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).

EFL students may also rely heavily on their past experiences or lack thereof when analyzing cases, limiting their ability to think beyond their own experiences and develop new perspectives. As one student elaborates in their reflective report:

"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).

EFL students' limited knowledge of cultural contexts can also affect their ability to analyze the case according to the principles covered in class, potentially limiting their capacity for speech development. One student expressed this concern 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).

5. Recommendations

The study suggests that CBL is an effective teaching method in public speaking courses, particularly for EFL undergraduate students. The findings indicate that carefully designed and managed CBL activities can deepen students' learning, enhance their critical thinking skills, build up their confidence, and provide a bridge between theoretical knowledge and practice. Considering the positive perception that the students had of CBL, instructors in EFL programs should consider incorporating CBL into their courses by careful planning and implementation.

The findings of this study also suggest that EFL students may face some challenges in the CBL public speaking course. The identified drawbacks indicate that careful designing of CBL activities should be taken into consideration to ensure that language barriers are addressed, and that scenarios are accessible and relatable to EFL students. Instructors must consider writing cases from a variety of cultures and providing adequate support for students who may struggle with cultural knowledge. Collaborative techniques such as peer and instructor feedback are a promising way to alleviate some of these challenges.

Overall, the benefits of the CBL approach outweigh the drawbacks in a public speaking course, as it offers students opportunities for deeper learning and the application of public speaking skills to real-life situations as well as enhancing their confidence in oral communication. While the drawbacks associated with CBL are existing, they should not be seen as a reason to abandon the method but rather an opportunity for a redesign of the CBL activities that will help mediate the challenges faced by EFL students.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, CBL used in a public speaking course is an effective method to enhance EFL undergraduate students' critical thinking and confidence in English public speeches. Through multiple data sources, including journals, reflective reports, and focus group interviews, students' perceptions of CBL were mostly positive, with many acknowledging CBL as a critical teaching and learning technique in a public speaking course that helps deepen their learning and sharpen their skills in real-life situations. However, this study also revealed some drawbacks to CBL when applied to EFL students, such as low language competence, over-reliance on past experiences, and limited knowledge of cultural contexts. Despite these challenges, instructors can mitigate these issues by adapting and designing CBL activities to provide adequate support to EFL students. These results suggest the need for further research to analyze the benefits and limitations of CBL among EFL students in public speaking courses, its influence on engagement, and the development of advanced skills such as critical thinking and oral communication competency.

The present study focused on a specific group of EFL undergraduate students at a Vietnamese university, which limited the reliability and generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study took place over a relatively short period of one semester, which could limit the understanding of the long-term effects of CBL on students' critical thinking and confidence in delivering English public speeches. Future studies should include larger and more diverse samples of EFL undergraduate students to enhance generalizability, and longer durations to explore sustained learning outcomes of CBL.

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NHẬN THỨC CỦA SINH VIÊN TIẾNG ANH VỀ PHƯƠNG PHÁP DẠY HỌC DỰA VÀO TÌNH HUỐNG TRONG HỌC PHẦN DIỄN THUYẾT TIẾNG ANH TRƯỚC CÔNG CHÚNG

Tóm tắt: Phương pháp dạy học dựa vào tình huống là một phương pháp sư phạm sử dụng các tình huống hoặc trường hợp thực tế để hướng dẫn người học phân tích và hình thành kiến thức và kỹ năng. Bài báo này trình bày một nghiên cứu về nhận thức của sinh viên đại học tiếng Anh về tính hiệu quả của phương pháp này trong học phần Diễn thuyết tiếng Anh trước công chúng tại một trường đại học Việt Nam. Trong suốt học phần, sinh viên được yêu cầu phân tích các tình huống khác nhau và chuẩn bị cho bài phát biểu trước công chúng bằng tiếng Anh. Dữ liệu được thu thập thông qua câu trả lời của sinh viên về các câu hỏi chiêm nghiệm trong và cuối học phần cũng như các câu hỏi phỏng vấn nhóm về các hoạt động trong các tình huống. Kết quả của nghiên cứu chỉ ra rằng việc sử dụng phương pháp học tập dựa trên tình huống tạo sự thu hút và tương tác trong lớp học và có hiệu quả cao trong việc cải thiện tư duy phân biện và sự tự tin của người học khi diễn thuyết trước công chúng bằng tiếng Anh. Sinh viên cũng nhận thấy rằng phương pháp này cho phép họ áp dụng kiến thức của mình vào các tình huống thực tế trong cuộc sống. Những kết quả này cho thấy rằng phương pháp dạy học dựa vào tình huống có hiệu quả tốt trong việc giảng dạy học phần Diễn thuyết tiếng Anh trước công chúng ở các trường đại học Việt Nam và có thể được áp dụng trong các bối cảnh giáo dục tương tự khác để nâng cao tư duy phân biện và kỹ năng giao tiếp của người học.

Từ khóa: Phương pháp dạy học dựa vào tình huống, tư duy phân biện, học phần nói, sinh viên tiếng Anh

Appendix: The cases used in the CBL public speaking course

1. The following case or scenario is for students to practice delivering group speeches.

You are invited to give a speech to the freshmen who just start to study at the Faculty of English, University of Foreign Languages and International Studies this academic year. They are somewhat like you when you entered this university. Discuss with your group members to decide on a specific topic and prepare to deliver the speech together for around 8 minutes. You may consider one of the following issues: Time management, Preparation for exams, Club activities, Part-time jobs, Course enrollment, ... (any topic that you think can appeal to the freshman). Some examples are below.

- i. You and your friends are giving a speech to freshmen about the importance of joining a language club in your university or the benefits of participating in language exchange programs.
- ii. You and your friends are giving a speech to freshmen about strategies for time management to balance study and social life.
- iii. You and your friends are giving a speech to freshmen about the benefits of volunteering or participating in community service projects.
- iv. You and your friends are giving a speech to freshmen about the best ways to study and prepare for exams.
- v. You and your friends are giving a speech to freshmen about campus resources and facilities, such as the library, student services, sports center, and health center.

2. The following case or scenario is for students to practice delivering short informative speeches. These speeches are recorded weekly for regular practice.

You are to deliver an informative speech within 3 minutes to share with your audience (general audience or if you choose to speak to a specific group of audience, state this clearly at the beginning of the speech and describe the features of the audience) about how to do something you are very good at, know very well or have a lot of experience. Some examples are below.

- i. An informative speech to share with a group of high school students about the importance of leadership skills and how to develop them.
- ii. An informative speech to share with a group of tourists about the best food and drinks to try while visiting your city.
- iii. An informative speech to share with a group of university students about the most common time management mistakes they need to avoid.

3. The following case or scenario is for students to practice delivering short persuasive speeches. These speeches are recorded weekly for regular practice.

You are to deliver a persuasive speech within 3 minutes to share with your audience (general audience or if you choose to speak to a specific group of audience, state this clearly at the beginning of the speech and describe the features of the audience) about giving up a bad habit - you can decide a specific bad habit that you feel like to talk about or have experience giving it up. Some examples are below.

- i. A persuasive speech to persuade a group of young people about the benefits of giving up social media addiction.
- ii. A persuasive speech to convince a group of teenagers about the benefits of giving up junk food and eating a clean diet.
- iii. A persuasive speech to persuade a group of university students about the benefits of giving up procrastination.

4. The following case or scenario is for students to practice their public speaking skills in English for their final individual speeches that are delivered online.

A group of third year American students are going to study in your university for one semester starting from January 2022 in an exchange program. These American students have not visited any Asian country before, and this is the first time they stay for half a year abroad. You are one of the students in your university who are selected to deliver an online speech to these American students before their departure. Your speech can be about any topic that you think is necessary and useful for the fellow American students (e.g. food, weather/clothes, learning styles in your university, extracurricular activities, historical places in your city, accommodation, local people, festivals, charitable activities, etc.) and can last for 6-8 minutes.