

Student-created marketing case studies: Looking through the lens of Cheng (2011)

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Abstract

Cheng's (2011) thesis is that specificity, the degree to which language features are tied to a particular discipline, greatly influences the application of ESP theory on teaching and learning. Through a brief examination of the literature and reflection of one teaching and learning context, Cheng argues for ESP practitioners to explore five basic considerations. These considerations are used here to examine the decisions made regarding an elective undergraduate marketing course taught at an upper tier university in Tokyo. One interesting result is that given the context, simply focusing on specific language features associated with case studies is not possible; other considerations such as academic literacy skills and the teaching of content means juggling the different needs of the students.

Key words: Cheng (2011), Specificity, Case study, marketing

VI. Introduction

One danger in applying pre-set theory to classroom practice is that planned activities may not be particularly suitable for all of the students. This is especially concerning to ESP practitioners given the essential role the needs of the students play in determining course methodology as well as the language features and skills to be taught (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). One illustration of this can be seen in Cheng's (2011) study into how *specificity*, the language associated with a particular discipline (Hyland, 2011) affected her classroom decision making. After reviewing the opposing views of Hutchinson and Waters (1985) and Swales (1985) regarding specificity, Cheng noted five basic considerations that influenced her classroom practice. These five considerations are used here as a framework to examine one elective under-graduate marketing course (in-class = 42 hours) taught at an upper tier university in Tokyo. Particular attention will focus on one task – the creation of a case study by students working in groups of four – and how decisions regarding specificity affect the application of ESP theory in this course.

Before analyzing the decisions taken surrounding the marketing course, however, a better understanding is needed of what Case Studies (hereafter, CS) are and why they are used.

VII. Case study

This section has three parts. In this first part, the use of CS as a research tool will be explained. In the second part, the focus is upon the use of CS in education, with particular emphasis placed on business curriculums. Lastly, the use of student-created CS will be discussed.

A. Case Studies in research

CS are used in a variety of disciplines which make them difficult to define. That said, in business they tend to examine “a phenomenon in its natural setting, employing multiple methods of data collection to gather information from one or a few entities (people, groups, or organizations).” Benbasat, Goldstein & Mead, 1987; 370). CS can be differentiated from other research paradigms in that the researcher does not set out to manipulate what he or she is studying. Instead, the researcher attempts to understand the *how* and *why* of a particular situation within its natural setting (Yin, 2009).

B. Teaching case studies

The purpose of using CS in education is to stimulate discussion and debate (Yin, 2009). As such, CS are referred to as one of the apprenticeship genres (Nesi and Gardener, 2012) and follow a move structure of `situation –

problem – solution – evaluation` (Hoey, 1983, as cited in Nesi and Gardner, 2012; 175). In business education, the phenomenon under investigation tends to be a real life problem a company has faced that can be better understood through the collection of information from a variety of primary and/or secondary sources (Ambrosini, Bowman & Collier, 2010).

There are several benefits to using CS to teach about marketing. Firstly, they are useful to help student learn and develop marketing theory (Christensen & Carlile, 2009). With a focus on language learners, a second benefit is that CS push the learner to work beyond their linguistic competence (Huckin, 1988, as cited in Jordan, 1997; 114-115). Ambrosini, Bowman and Collier conclude by stating that the overall benefits to using teaching case studies are that they can target either “knowledge application, analysis, synthesis or evaluation.” (2010, 208)

C. Student-created case studies

Student-created CS are not only a research tool but also a teaching tool for students to learn. There is very little literature regarding student-created CS as a means of learning a subject. The majority of the writings are unpublished teacher’s notes available on the Internet and tend to be situated in the post-graduate context. For example, in Swiercz (Unpublished) there is a fairly comprehensive teacher’s guide to how to scaffold students writing CS. To the best of my knowledge, no research exists of using student-created marketing CS in an under graduate EFL context.

VIII. Cheng’s Considerations

In this section, the marketing course is explained focusing on Cheng’s (2011) five considerations.

A. Consideration 1 – Social Milieu

The social milieu can include student demographics, stakeholder influences, and the wider social influences such as culture. For Cheng, the characteristics of the student population had a major influence when considering specificity, as her class was heterogeneous and, therefore, deciding what and how language features were to be introduced was particularly troublesome.

In the marketing course, three important aspects of the social milieu caused me to consider the effect of specificity. They are the University’s rationale for the course, my conceptions of course, and student demographics. The purpose for the course, according to the University administration, is to offer students an opportunity to practice what they had learned in a previous study skills course, which has a focus of developing academic reading, writing, and presentation skills. Implications from this, regarding the effects of specificity is that there would be less time for instructing how to write a CS.

A second influence is my own conception of what the marketing course should be. The course was originally designed to be a primer for those students who wished to go on to pursue their MBA. This meant introducing not only text types specific to CS, but also academic literacy skills that would aid studying for an MBA.

Dissimilar to Cheng’s situation, students enrolled in the marketing course were homogeneous; all students were Economics majors. That said, there were two distinct polar groupings of students that emerge each time the course took place, which complicate what was taught. On one side was the number of advanced-level learners (often referred to as *returnees* in Japan), and the other was the number of lower-proficiency learners who are highly motivated. The former group of students often enrolls to develop their writing skills, while the latter group tends to seek more opportunities to speak. With clearly different needs, further consideration needs to be given as to how and what language features should be taught.

B. Consideration 2 – Learning Objectives

For Cheng, learning objectives refer to “what will students learn in a course, and what will they gain from taking the course?” (2011, 51) The three learning objectives for the marketing course are below.

The student will:

- explain the 4P’s/4E’s and the Market Audit by doing newspaper summaries, surprise quizzes, and in-class quizzes
- analyze the marketing decisions of a company by leading and participating in group discussions
- critique information from secondary sources by writing a CS.

Over the duration of the semester, the course moves from shallow to deeper learning (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst,

Hill, and Krathwohl, 1956). This created demands on using various language features and skills needed to do each as the objectives became more difficult. In the initial weeks, students were only tested on vocabulary related to marketing. Towards the end, students were expected to be able to *use* the vocabulary to partake in discussions and write their own CS. Given this increasing demand on language skills, collaboration with other classmates becomes essential.

C. Consideration 3 – Input Material and Output Task

After surveying a range of approaches suitable for teachers to use as potential methods to create materials, Cheng then explains that given the heterogeneous group of students in her teaching context she found it best to use student own material; student were to find research articles specific to their own field.

Identifying accessible models for students to read and use is particularly difficult. As such, most of the materials used in the marketing class were either teacher created/modified, as suggested by Swales (2009), or student collected material.

With regard to the complexity of writing a CS, Robinson (2011) advises that when a task is too difficult for students to do, teachers should break it up into more manageable parts. As students are able to do these parts, then the teacher can increase the complexity to further enhance learning.

Asking students to simply write a CS and learn the content of marketing at the same time is clearly too difficult and therefore a decision was made to make to only include the first two moves of a CS, the situation and the problem. The situation includes background information needed to understand the problem. The problem is quite detailed and can be further broken up into pertinent information about the *macro environment* (factors a company is not able to control, such as nature or government regulation), the *meso environment* (such as the power competitors, buyers and suppliers have on a company's decision making), and the *micro environment* (the factors that the company controls, such as product development and distribution) in which the marketing problem occurred.

Tasks such as group discussions, writing clinics and the creation of a graphic organizer which illustrates where the group is at with its CS are all used to support the CS writing process.

D. Consideration 4 – Methodology

Cheng defined methodology as what teachers and students do. A major component of her course was having students bring in materials specific to their area (consideration 3). Therefore she chose to hold discussion forums utilizing samples from students' written reflections about language they found to be particularly important in their individual articles. Her role in these discussions was mostly limited to that of a moderator; she posed questions regarding rhetorical structures, lexico-grammatical features, how the writer communicated his/her ideas, in addition drawing students' awareness to their own rhetorical structures they had used in their own written reflections.

In the marketing course, where the students were learning content and how to write a case study, as well as holding round-table discussions, the methodology was, by necessity, quite eclectic. Decisions regarding specificity, therefore, depended on what was being done in the classroom.

E. Consideration 5 – Assessing student learning

Cheng used a variety of means to evaluate her students, most of which dealt with asking students questions, both verbally and in writing, and then evaluating how well students responded. She mentions the use of rubrics and other evaluative tools that are commonly found in writing classes.

Given the context in which the market course is taught (Consideration 1), it is necessary to provide students with a grade. An added consideration was that students could challenge the grade, therefore necessitating a need to quantify each evaluative tool used. Below was the grading criteria used in the marketing course. In hindsight, it is interesting to note that each criterion targets a different level of Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956).

- Surprise quizzes (10%) – on previous day class content (short answer, multiple choice)
- Group discussion (30%) – rubric that looks at the analysis of the problem and suggestions regarding possible contributing factors
- Case Study (45%) – rubric that includes rhetorical structure, critical addition and deletion of information to explain the problem, citation and referencing

- Research log (15%) – an account of each member’s contribution to completing the case study. Used to justify part of each student’s grade.

IX. Interaction

One area of Cheng’s considerations that has not been discussed is how they interact with one another. This can be seen with regard to the analysis of the marketing course stated above. For example, in Consideration 1 (social milieu) two distinct groupings of learners enrolled in the course each semester and had language learning needs that were often at odds; the higher-proficiency learners often spoke well but required greater attention to developing as writers, while the lower-proficiency but highly-motivated learners desired greater opportunities to develop their speaking abilities.

This had direct influence on other considerations. In attempts to negotiate between the needs of the two groups, both writing and speaking tasks were needed (consideration 3). The influence of specificity here meant introducing not only the writing conventions associated with CS, but also the speaking conventions commonly found in discussions. This influenced what was learned (consideration 2) but also how students and teachers interacted in the classroom. (consideration 4), and how student learning was evaluated (consideration 5).

X. Conclusion

This short article has been about understanding the effect that specificity has on one ESP/EAP marketing course. The marketing course was analyzed using Cheng’s (2011) five basic considerations. It was concluded with a simple example of how the considerations interact with each other to further complicate decisions surrounding specificity. As a result one insight into the marketing course gained is that it involves much more than simply teaching students how to write CS, such as students learning content and academic literacy skills. The necessary addition of these two extra areas meant that decisions needed to be made regarding what to cut from the CS needed to be made, and as such what language features were not taught.

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