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The Case Method in Student-Centered English Learning: Student Perceptions in Japanese Higher Education

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Abstract

The shift toward communicative and student-centered language education has increased the emphasis on meaningful interaction, active participation, and purposeful language use. Within this context, the case method offers a potentially productive approach to English language education because it engages learners in interpreting complex situations, discussing alternative perspectives, and making and justifying decisions. However, relatively little research has examined how university students in Japan experience an adapted case-method approach in English-learning contexts. This study addresses this gap by investigating students' perceptions of case-based English learning during the preparatory phase of an ongoing action research project. Data were collected through an anonymous post-course questionnaire from 103 students enrolled in seven classes across four English courses at a private university in Japan. The questionnaire comprised 13 five-point Likert-scale items and three open-ended questions addressing participation, communicative engagement, confidence, and learning support. Overall, students responded positively to the approach. Active group discussion received the highest rating, followed by feeling comfortable sharing ideas, and becoming better at explaining opinions in English. Speaking confidence was strongly correlated with students' perceived ability to explain their opinions, while problem analysis was strongly associated with perceived overall communicative competence. Qualitative analysis of 236 comments further indicated that students valued discussion and opportunities for active language use, but experienced difficulties with unfamiliar vocabulary, listening comprehension, and the simultaneous cognitive and linguistic demands of case discussion. The findings suggest that an adapted case-method approach can provide meaningful opportunities for purposeful communication, collaborative reasoning, and opinion expression in Japanese university English classrooms. At the same time, its effectiveness depends on careful linguistic and pedagogical scaffolding rather than simple transfer of the method from its original disciplinary context. The findings will inform the next action research cycle, with particular attention to pre-task scaffolding, interactional language support, and responsible use of generative AI. Further research will explore the transferability of these findings to comparable EFL contexts in East Asia and beyond.

Keywords: *case method; English language education; student-centered learning; Japanese higher education; EFL; action research*

1. Introduction

English language education has increasingly moved toward pedagogies that position learners as active participants rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Communicative language teaching emphasizes meaningful language use in context, while active learning foregrounds learner participation and engagement [1,2]. These developments have contributed to a broader understanding of English learning in which communication is not simply practice of linguistic forms but a means of interpreting situations and engaging with others.

Student-centered learning, however, involves more than increasing the amount of student talk. Communication outside the classroom often requires people to deal with incomplete information, consider different perspectives, explain their reasoning, and respond where no predetermined answer exists. The pedagogical issue is therefore not only whether students communicate, but also what they are asked to accomplish through communication.

The case method offers one framework for such learning. Developed most prominently at Harvard Business School, it engages students with real or realistic situations involving uncertainty and decision-making. Students identify significant issues, consider alternative interpretations, discuss possible responses, and justify their views [3]. Learning develops through preparation and participation rather than through receiving a single correct solution.

Applying this method in English-learning classrooms nevertheless creates a particular challenge. In its original professional context, language primarily serves as the means for discussing disciplinary issues. In an EFL classroom, students must simultaneously analyze the case and communicate through a language they are still developing. The approach can therefore provide meaningful reasons to use English while also creating linguistic, cognitive, and interactional demands.

This issue is relevant in Japanese higher education, where research has identified hesitation, confidence, classroom conditions, and willingness to communicate as important dimensions of English participation. Matsuoka et al. show that willingness to communicate can be influenced by classroom experiences [4], while other studies document the significance of silence and perceived difficulty in Japanese university English classrooms [5,6].

Although case-method teaching has been explored in language-related contexts [7], relatively little attention has been paid to how Japanese university students themselves experience an adapted case-method approach. The present study therefore asks: How do university students perceive and experience an adapted case-method approach in English courses? The study forms the preparatory phase of an ongoing action research project and also seeks to identify directions for subsequent pedagogical refinement [8].

2. The Case Method in English Language Learning

A defining feature of the case method is that students are not simply presented with content to understand. They encounter a situation requiring interpretation and judgment. Preparation before class is followed by discussion in which students compare interpretations, evaluate alternatives, and justify decisions [3]. The instructor facilitates this process rather than supplying a predetermined answer. This makes the method compatible with student-centered learning because students' perspectives become part of how the problem is explored. Yet adaptation is necessary when the method moves into a language-learning environment. Esteban and Pérez-Cañado emphasize that implementation in Business English depends on learners' linguistic resources and instructional circumstances [7].

English functions simultaneously as an object of learning and the medium through which students interpret information and communicate their reasoning. This dual role creates both pedagogical potential and difficulty. Cases can give learners authentic reasons to clarify information, explain opinions, disagree, compare possible actions, and respond to others. At the same time, students must comprehend the case, formulate ideas, listen to classmates, select appropriate language, and respond in real time.

As Littlewood argues regarding communicative and task-based teaching in East Asian contexts, pedagogical approaches should be adapted to local educational conditions rather than transferred unchanged [9]. In the present study, adaptation therefore means preserving the interpretive and discussion-oriented character of the case method while providing enough linguistic and interactional support for students to participate.

3. Method

The study was conducted as the preparatory phase of a broader action research project. Action research was selected because findings from classroom practice can be used to inform subsequent cycles of pedagogical development [8].

A total of 103 students at a private university in Japan voluntarily completed an anonymous post-course questionnaire. They were enrolled in seven classes across four English courses: TOEIC Progress, English Fundamentals, Advanced English, and Business Presentation. Most participants studied English primarily in an EFL environment.

The case method was adapted for these English-learning contexts. Cases were developed by the instructor or selected from the university archive and generally shortened to approximately two to three pages. Students read the cases before class and completed vocabulary exercises, short fill-in-the-blank activities, and written responses to discussion questions. Classroom work then included pair or group discussion, whole-class exchange, and reflection.

The questionnaire contained 13 five-point Likert-scale items and three open-ended questions. Items addressed motivation, comprehension, vocabulary, participation, confidence, opinion explanation, problem analysis, and perceived communicative competence. The open-ended questions asked students what helped them most, what difficulties they experienced, and what changes might improve the approach. The Likert items showed high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .939$). Quantitative responses were analyzed descriptively and correlationally, while qualitative comments were thematically examined.

4. Results

As shown in Table 1 below, the students responded particularly positively to the interactive dimensions of case-based learning.

Table 1. Selected Student Perceptions of Case-Based English Learning

Item ID	Construct	Mean (*M*)	Std. Dev (*SD*)
Q6	Active Group Discussion	4.34	0.73
Q9	Safe Idea Sharing	4.27	0.75
Q11	Explaining Opinions	4.15	0.85
Q4	Vocabulary retention	4.08	0.93
Q3	Reading/Listening Ease	3.95	0.88

Note: Items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Higher scores indicate more positive perceptions of case-method learning.

Active Group Discussion received the higher rating (M = 4.34), followed by Safe Idea Sharing (M = 4.27) and Explaining Opinions (M = 4.15). Vocabulary Retention (M = 4.08) and Reading/Listening Ease (M = 3.95) were also rated positively, although the latter was comparatively lower.

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine relationships among the 13 questionnaire items (see Figure 1). All correlations were statistically significant at the p < .01 level.

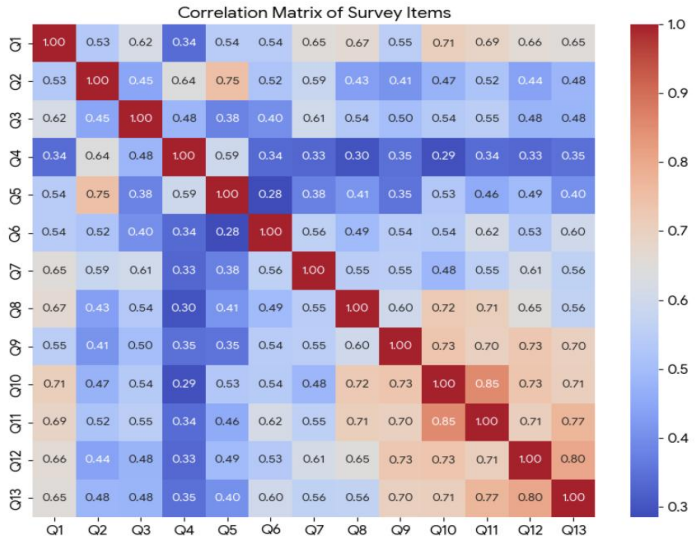


Figure 1. Heatmap of Pearson correlation coefficients (r) between the 13 survey items.
Note: All correlations were significant at the *p*<.01 level.

The strongest correlation was between Speaking Confidence and Ability to Explain Opinions (r = .85, p < .001). Explaining Opinions also correlated strongly with perceived Overall Communicative Competence (r = .77), as did Problem Analysis (r = .80). In contrast, Vocabulary Retention and Speaking Confidence showed a substantially weaker relationship (r = .29). All correlations among the 13 items were significant at p < .01. An exploratory ANOVA found no statistically significant differences in overall perceptions across the course groups, F (4, 94) = 1.67, p = .16.

The three open-ended questions generated 236 comments, organized into four themes. First, students frequently valued group discussion and opportunities to express their own opinions. Hearing peers' ideas was also perceived as helping them reconsider or extend their understanding. Second, unfamiliar vocabulary, specialized terminology, listening comprehension, and the need to manage language and content simultaneously were common difficulties. Third, some students expressed concern that generative AI could replace the process of developing and articulating their own responses. Finally, students suggested more familiar topics, greater vocabulary preparation, and additional discussion time. Thus, students generally valued the communicative demands of case learning while simultaneously experiencing those demands as challenging.

5. Discussion

5.1 Purposeful Participation

The strongest positive responses concerned discussion, sharing ideas, and explaining opinions. This suggests that students experienced the value of the case method primarily through participation rather than simply through exposure to case materials. Student-centered learning in this context is therefore not merely a matter of increasing student speaking time. Cases provide something to interpret and respond to, and classmates' perspectives become relevant to that process. Participation involves speaking, listening, comparing interpretations, and reconsidering one's position.

The particularly strong relationship between Speaking Confidence and Explaining Opinions (r = .85) is revealing. Confidence may be connected not only to speaking more fluently but also to feeling able to make one's thinking understandable to others. Likewise, the strong relationship between Problem Analysis and perceived Communicative Competence (r = .80) suggests that students associated communication with meaningful intellectual work rather than language practice alone.

This interpretation is compatible with research showing that willingness to communicate may be shaped by classroom experiences [4]. The present study did not directly measure willingness to communicate and therefore does not demonstrate an increase in WTC. However, students' positive evaluations of discussion and safe idea sharing indicate that pedagogical design can contribute to conditions in which participation is perceived as worthwhile and manageable. This is significant in light of studies documenting silence or hesitation in Japanese university English classrooms [5,6]. Rather than assuming that learners are simply reluctant to speak, teachers can consider whether activities provide meaningful reasons for interaction and whether students have adequate time, preparation, and support.

5.2 Engagement and Difficulty

Positive engagement did not mean that students found the pedagogy easy. Reading/listening received the lowest of the selected ratings, and qualitative comments identified vocabulary, listening, and simultaneous content/language processing as major challenges. These difficulties are understandable because case discussions require several processes at once: comprehending the situation, remembering information, developing a position, listening to peers, selecting linguistic resources, and responding. For EFL learners, the demands of language processing operate alongside the analytical demands of the case.

The solution, however, is not necessarily to remove complexity. Uncertainty is central to case-method learning because different responses are possible. If cases become so simplified that little interpretation or judgment is required, they risk becoming ordinary comprehension exercises.
The more useful goal is to make participation in complexity achievable.

The weak relationship between Vocabulary Retention and Speaking Confidence (r = .29) is important here. Vocabulary preparation can support comprehension but does not automatically enable interaction. Students also need resources for introducing an opinion, agreeing or disagreeing, requesting clarification, elaborating, responding to another speaker, and modifying their views. This helps explain why linguistic adaptation should extend beyond shortening case texts. The present design already included vocabulary work and written preparation, yet students still identified interactional difficulty. Future support should therefore bridge more explicitly from pre-class preparation into live discussion.

5.3 Scaffolding and Generative AI

The qualitative responses suggest several practical directions. Vocabulary introduced before class could be deliberately recycled during discussion tasks. Written responses could also serve as a starting point from which students practice explaining and modifying ideas orally. Brief support for interactional expressions, such as asking for clarification, agreeing, disagreeing, or connecting ideas, may help students participate without over-scripting the discussion. Students' preference for familiar or relatable topics also deserves attention. Familiarity can reduce some processing demands while still allowing cases to involve uncertainty and differing perspectives. Adaptation therefore need not mean reducing intellectual complexity; it can mean making the context sufficiently accessible for students to direct more attention toward reasoning and communication.

Generative AI presents an additional issue. Students' concerns suggest that AI may become problematic when it replaces the process of developing a position. In case-based learning, educational value lies not only in the final answer but also in deciding what matters, interpreting ambiguity, considering alternatives, and explaining one's reasoning. AI could nevertheless support language learning, for example, by helping students explore vocabulary or possible expressions. The distinction needed in subsequent cycles is therefore between AI as linguistic support and AI as a substitute for students' interpretive work. Clear guidance regarding purpose and timing may be more productive than treating AI simply as permitted or prohibited.

6. Implications for the Next Action Research Cycle

The findings will inform three main modifications in the next cycle. First, pre-task scaffolding will connect vocabulary and sentence-level preparation more directly with language students can reuse during discussion. Second, interactional support will help students move from prepared responses toward listening and responding to peers in less predictable exchanges. Third, guidance on responsible generative-AI use will distinguish support for language development from substitution for students' own reasoning. The questionnaire can also be refined to examine which forms of support students find useful at different stages of the process. Follow-up interviews may further illuminate how preparation, difficulty, confidence, and participation interact. These refinements reflect the action-research principle that students' experiences do not merely evaluate an intervention; they become part of the evidence used to redesign it [8].

7. Conclusion

This study investigated students' perceptions of an adapted case-method approach in Japanese university English courses. Students responded particularly positively to active discussion, safe idea sharing, and opportunities to explain opinions, while vocabulary, listening, and the combined linguistic and cognitive demands of case discussion remained challenging. The findings suggest that the case method can support student-centered English learning when learners are given meaningful reasons to use English: interpreting situations, hearing different perspectives, explaining their thinking, and reasoning collaboratively.

Its potential, however, depends on adaptation. The goal is neither to reproduce the original method unchanged nor to eliminate the complexity that makes case discussion meaningful. Instead, teachers need to create sufficient linguistic and interactional support for students to engage with that complexity. The next action research cycle will therefore focus on strengthening the transition from preparation to interaction and developing clearer guidance for responsible AI use. In this way, the case method may serve as a student-centered framework connecting English learning with collaborative engagement in real-world problems and perspectives. Although limited to one Japanese university, this study provides a starting point for examining the case method in comparable educational contexts. Subsequent action research cycles will explore its potential for fostering meaningful communication, collaborative reasoning, and student-centered learning in EFL settings with similar pedagogical challenges, both within and beyond Japan.

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