



Pros and Cons of Using the Case Method to Supplement TOEIC Instruction

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Abstract

This paper examines the efficacy of the case method as a supplementary instructional approach for Teaching of English for International Communication (TOEIC) preparation. The case method, traditionally utilized in business and law education, involves the use of real-world scenarios to enhance critical thinking, problem-solving, and language application skills. This study evaluates both the advantages and disadvantages of integrating case studies into TOEIC curricula.

Pros: The TOEIC test assesses non-native English speakers' proficiency in an international business environment. While traditional instruction focuses on language mechanics and test-taking strategies, incorporating the case method may offer a more holistic learning experience. This method encourages active learning, contextual language use, and engagement with complex texts. In addition, the case method enhances students' ability to apply language skills in practical, real-world situations, which is crucial for TOEIC success. It promotes critical thinking and collaborative learning, as students analyze cases, propose solutions, and discuss outcomes in groups. Additionally, it can increase student motivation and interest, making learning more dynamic and interactive [1].

Cons: The case method may present challenges, such as the need for extensive preparation by instructors and potential difficulty in aligning case content with specific TOEIC test components. It may also require more classroom time than traditional methods, which can be a limitation in time-constrained instructional settings [2], [3].

While the case method has potential benefits for TOEIC instruction, its implementation must be carefully planned to address its limitations. Future research should focus on empirical studies to measure its effectiveness and develop best practices for integrating case studies into TOEIC preparation courses.

Keywords: TOEIC, case method, English language instruction, test preparation, educational strategies

The present paper aims to explore the advantages and disadvantages of the case method as a supplementary instructional approach for teaching the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication). This research draws upon the author's over four years of experience teaching TOEIC preparation courses at her university, where, since 2020, the case method has been employed not only for business and commerce majors but also for English language instruction, including TOEIC preparation courses. It is important to note that, although the introduction of the case method for English language courses was initially met with reluctance from less experienced faculty, it has successfully complemented textbook-based courses with a variety of authentic and engaging learning materials.

The Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) (Listening & Reading) is a standardized assessment designed to evaluate the English proficiency of non-native speakers, with an emphasis on listening and reading skills. According to ETS, as of 2023, the test has been administered in over 14,000 companies and organizations across 130 countries worldwide [4]. It has been predominantly utilized in Asia for career advancement and educational purposes. The test is effective in evaluating essential communication skills required in business [5]. The TOEIC test has been widely adopted by educational institutions to measure student progress and enhance employability [6]. In addition to its diagnostic function, university curricula incorporate a variety of TOEIC preparation courses designed to improve students' test-taking abilities and English proficiency. However, despite its title, traditional TOEIC instruction often overemphasizes tedious grammatical knowledge through repetitive drills and test-taking strategies, which has a limited effect on enhancing students' communication skills. This approach primarily focuses on developing students' receptive skills (listening and reading) while neglecting their productive skills (speaking and writing). While it may be true that highly proficient test-takers achieve good results on the TOEIC, the reverse is not necessarily the case. Research on the effectiveness of TOEIC, although somewhat limited in scope,



indicates that high TOEIC scores do not always reflect strong language proficiency and that there is little correlation between test score improvements and increased overall language proficiency [7]. Furthermore, a strong emphasis on TOEIC-specific content in university programs tends to narrow the curriculum, negatively impacting the development of complex thinking skills. This focus reduces students' opportunities for more comprehensive language learning and misaligns with their learning goals. In particular, while TOEIC practice may be tailored to meet the needs of less proficient learners, these low-level students may become discouraged by the volume and difficulty of the material that must be covered, and they may not perceive significant improvement in their proficiency.

It is essential to emphasize that language proficiency is attained through a well-rounded acquisition of four types of knowledge: grammatical knowledge (including grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation), discourse knowledge, which refers to the ability to construct coherent language in both written and oral forms), sociolinguistic knowledge (the ability to understand appropriate language use in various social contexts), and strategic knowledge (the techniques for overcoming communication breakdowns) [8]. As previously mentioned, TOEIC-specific training has a limited impact on overall proficiency, as it heavily emphasizes grammatical knowledge and receptive skills at the expense of productive skills. One potential solution to address the deficiencies in TOEIC instruction is to implement the case method.

The case method, originally employed in medicine during the 19th century and later adopted by Harvard Business School in the early 20th century to teach graduate students how to analyze real-world business problems [9], is now utilized across various disciplines, including business, legal education, psychology, teacher training, and even language instruction. This approach encourages critical thinking, problem-solving, and practical language application. Defined as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in-depth within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" [10, p. 18], the case method of instruction presents "a problem that needs to be solved" [11, p. 135]. It serves as a teaching strategy that bridges the gap between theory and practice by motivating students to apply theoretical concepts to real-life situations [12].

The benefits of using the case method in language learning are numerous. This learner-centered approach, which is fundamental to the method, promotes independent learning [13] and fosters critical thinking and reflective learning through problem-solving activities. Additionally, by encouraging students to collaborate and share their findings in group discussions, the case method enhances teamwork and cooperation while also developing students' managerial skills, such as delivering presentations and organizing various responsibilities within the group. In the context of language learning, the case method provides opportunities for students to engage in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Real-life scenarios facilitate vocabulary and grammar acquisition and retention. Last but not least, the case method increases students' motivation and cultivates positive attitudes toward language learning by promoting active participation in problem-solving activities [14].

Nevertheless, employing the case method for language learning presents several drawbacks. Business cases can be lengthy and linguistically demanding, posing challenges for students with low proficiency. As a result, educators may need to create or adapt case studies to align with students' proficiency levels and learning needs. Additionally, assessing students' achievements is a significant challenge for many language teachers. Some authors recommend that educators utilize standardized tests, self-evaluations, peer assessments, and teacher feedback [15]. Furthermore, the complex terminology used in case studies may pose difficulties for teachers who lack a deep understanding of business concepts or are unfamiliar with the case study method itself.

The scarcity of case studies specifically designed for teaching English for various purposes, including the TOEIC, and aimed at learners with diverse language proficiencies, presents significant challenges in employing the case method in language instruction. Some authors recommend that language teachers select general interest articles from newspapers or magazines, deconstruct the information, and incorporate audio and visual materials to enhance the print information [14]. Following this guidance, the author presents a case example utilized in one of her classes. The case, titled "Globalization and English in Japanese Companies," was adapted from an online edition of a Japanese newspaper that discussed the adoption of English as the official language in several major Japanese companies.

The primary objective of this case study is to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge—specifically grammar, vocabulary, and communication strategies—and practical application. Additionally, it aims to enhance traditional TOEIC instruction by incorporating activities designed to develop students' productive skills, including speaking (through discussions and debates), writing (via pre- and post-case writing assignments), critical thinking, and research skills (by engaging



in discussions with peers and conducting information searches), as well as collaborative skills (by encouraging students to work in pairs or groups to support an argument).

The content was adapted to suit the proficiency levels of lower-intermediate students, and some assignments were modeled after components of the TOEIC test. The case study was prepared at home, requiring students to complete reading, vocabulary, and comprehension questions. A review of the vocabulary was conducted through cold calls, followed by pair discussions of the assigned comprehension questions. Next, the debate topic was introduced: "Japanese companies should use English as their official language." Students were invited to join groups based on their perspectives, either for or against the topic. Each team discussed and prepared their arguments for the debate. English usage was mandatory throughout the preparation and debate process, although students occasionally faced challenges in articulating their opinions. The teacher monitored students' participation levels, facilitated discussions, and ensured that each student had the opportunity to express their arguments. Finally, the teacher and students determined which side presented the most convincing arguments. The discussion concluded with a takeaway and a post-case assignment, in which students were required to write a short essay on the importance of using English as the official language in Japanese companies. Assessment was based on two factors: the quality of the home assignments (both pre- and post-case) and the value of students' contributions during pair or group discussions.

Student reception of the case method has been positive. At the conclusion of the 7-week term of a TOEIC class that incorporated three case studies, student evaluations reflected favorable feedback, with comments such as:

"Good opportunity to exchange opinions with peers."

"Good balance between group discussions and class discussions."

"I learned many new words from the case readings."

"It was a valuable opportunity to communicate my views in English."

"Class discussions enabled me to deepen my understanding of current issues."

"Participant-centered classes are fun."

"I was able to overcome my fear of speaking English."

Nevertheless, the author encountered several challenges in her attempt to supplement TOEIC instruction with the case method. The first challenge was the lack of real-world business experience among undergraduate students, which complicates the teaching of authentic business cases and necessitates a more flexible approach from the instructor. The second issue pertains to the obedient behavior of Japanese students compared to their peers from other cultures. Japanese students often view their teachers as figures of authority, leading them to refrain from questioning or challenging their teachers' opinions [16]. Another challenge was the relatively passive attitude and lack of initiative exhibited by Japanese students during group discussions. Many students prefer not to disrupt the harmony of the group by challenging their peers, which can render discussions stale and ineffective [16]. Finally, some students may associate a higher TOEIC score with more intensive TOEIC-specific training or test-taking strategies, resulting in differing expectations for a TOEIC class.

In conclusion, the case method presents a promising approach to overcoming the limitations of traditional TOEIC instruction by fostering critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and practical language use. While advantageous, the implementation of the case method in TOEIC courses necessitates significant adaptation, careful selection of case studies, and thorough teacher preparation, particularly for learners lacking business experience. Therefore, we can assert that, despite our initial hesitations, the integration of the case method can diversify TOEIC instruction, enhance communicative proficiency, and better align with students' language learning objectives.

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