Case Studies as a Tool for Merging Theory and Practise in Foreign Language Didactics

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DOI: 10.18355/XL.2024.17.04.06

Abstract
This study examines the implementation of the case study method in the Didactics of a German course at the University of Ljubljana. It was introduced in response to the challenges of combining theoretical knowledge with practical application in foreign language teacher education. The research explores how this method, traditionally used in disciplines such as law and medicine, enhances the learning experience for pre-service German language teachers. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study collects quantitative and qualitative data from first-year Masters students to assess the effectiveness of the method in improving critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and the ability to apply theoretical concepts in the classroom. The results indicate that while students found the case studies highly effective in linking theory and practice and motivating learning, there is room for improvement in developing critical thinking and teaching skills. The study concludes that the case study method is a valuable tool for experiential learning in teacher education and offers significant potential for wider application across university courses.
Key words: case study, language teaching methodology, GFL pre-service teacher, university teaching, problem-solving

Introduction

With the Bologna reform, which aimed to standardize higher education across Europe, the University of Ljubljana restructured its teacher education programs so that teacher training is now a second-level Master's program. After completing the Bachelor's program in German, interested students enroll in the second stage, where they take several general didactic and pedagogical subjects as well as specialized didactic subjects, literature, and linguistics. In addition to lectures, seminars, and tutorials at the faculty, future teachers of German complete compulsory observation and teaching practice in schools. Although the Bologna reform has brought some improvements, years of implementation have also revealed shortcomings. Lah (2022) highlights that second-level French students do not have enough language courses within the Master's program, which results in language difficulties, while Retelj and Kosevski Puljić (2016) note that despite practical training in schools, students still have too few opportunities to acquire practical skills for classroom teaching. They emphasize the importance of reflective practice in teaching, which plays a crucial role in building one's own teaching theory in the post-method period.

Annual student evaluations of the German teaching program at the Faculty of Arts reveal that students often struggle to apply theoretical knowledge in practice. Consequently, they view teaching theoretical concepts in lectures and seminars as unnecessary and irrelevant to classroom work. Additionally, students report insufficient exposure to the concrete problems encountered in teaching and feel they must be equipped to handle these challenges.

This gap between theory and practice is a well-known problem in teacher education, especially where traditional teaching methods prevail, emphasizing theoretical knowledge rather than practical skills (Korthagen & Wibbels, 2001). Although study programs have been restructured with the Bologna reform, there is still too little emphasis on the practical knowledge that future teachers need to master the daily challenges in the classroom. Due to this discrepancy, prospective teachers often feel

inadequately prepared and need help applying theoretical concepts. Often, the everyday challenges of school life lead to frustration and dissatisfaction, as prospective teachers cannot practice the knowledge they have acquired at university.

Although students are expected to develop critical thinking competencies during their studies and to acquire high-quality and in-depth knowledge that they will be able to apply in practice in a variety of ways, it is not easy to motivate students to engage in research-oriented and problem-based learning, active participation and independent, in-depth learning in the traditional lecture-based teaching format. Teaching in universities is still characterized by a teacher-centered approach, focusing on imparting knowledge and concepts but less on promoting active learning and encouraging students to take responsibility for their learning (Biggs & Tang, 2011). This pedagogical model contrasts sharply with the objectives of critical thinking, research-oriented learning, and problem-based learning, which are essential for practical teacher training.

In response to these challenges and to better connect theory, we have introduced the case study method in the Didactics of German course. Initially used as a teaching method in law and medicine, the case study method was successfully implemented at the Harvard University Graduate School of Business and extended to other fields (Kreber 2001: 222, McCarthy 2006). However, this method remains relatively unknown in foreign language didactics.

This study aims to assess the effectiveness of the case study method in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application for pre-service German language teachers.

Addressing this gap is crucial because integrating theory and practice is fundamental to developing competent and reflective educators (Schön, 1987). This research explores how the case study method can be a practical tool to facilitate this integration, offering a structured yet adaptable way to simulate real-world teaching situations. By evaluating the effectiveness of case studies in pre-service teacher education, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of innovative approaches that bridge the long-standing gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application in foreign language teaching.

Case Studies in Education

Case studies, defined as detailed examinations of complex examples that offer insights into specific problems (Fry et al., 1999), have been used across disciplines to improve learning outcomes. Based on various studies, Gross Davis (1993: 162) summarises that a good case study should contain the following elements: “tells a "real" story, raises a thought-provoking issue, has elements of conflict, promotes empathy with the central characters, lacks an obvious or clear-cut right answer, encourages students to think and take a position, demands a decision, is relatively concise.” These elements are crucial for students’ active engagement and foster deep learning.

Case-based learning is a form of experiential learning that stems from constructivist learning principles. It emphasizes collaboration, self-regulation, and the promotion of higher taxonomic levels through feedback, discussion, and self-reflection.

In the context of teacher education, case studies can serve as a powerful tool for bridging theoretical knowledge with practical application. Kreber (2001: 226) emphasizes that incorporating case studies into university education can enable students to develop critical thinking and self-direction because case studies provide students with the opportunity for experiential learning. Bruning et al. (2008) investigated the effectiveness of case studies with educational psychology students and found that face-to-face and online case study discussions significantly improve critical thinking skills. This finding aligns with Fixen’s (2024) argument that case

studies increase critical thinking skills, link theories and practice, and improve problem-solving skills. Students who learn through case studies are better able to solve real-life problems and apply their knowledge more effectively in practice.

Research demonstrates that case studies effectively equip students to solve real-world problems and allow them to apply theoretical knowledge to solve these problems. As teachers are exposed to many situations daily and constantly have to make different decisions, the rapid transfer of theoretical knowledge into practice is invaluable. While the benefits of using case studies in fields such as medicine, law, and science are well-documented, there is a noticeable gap in research concerning their application in foreign language didactics. Exploring the effectiveness of case studies in foreign language teacher education could provide essential insights into innovative teaching methods and training of future teachers.

Case study analysis in teacher education can offer unique opportunities for linking theory and practice, as case studies simulate various classroom situations and allow for addressing specific challenges related to foreign language learning and teaching. For instance, case studies can simulate classroom scenarios involving multilingual students or students with varying levels of language proficiency. Such scenarios allow pre-service teachers to develop differentiation and inclusive education strategies crucial in modern language classrooms. Case studies can be designed, for instance, for future teachers to think about and find solutions for integrating digital tools, adapting lesson plans for students with special needs, designing project-based learning, encouraging collaborative learning, and addressing everyday challenges such as establishing interaction among students, assessing language abilities, integrating specific content into lessons.

Case studies can serve as a form of experiential learning, as they facilitate the internalization of different theories and allow future teachers to explore how theories manifest in practice by analyzing and seeking solutions for presented challenges. By working through these scenarios, pre-service teachers are better equipped to reflect on teaching methods and develop a more flexible, adaptive approach to language instruction.

In a time when reflective practice is increasingly emphasized in teacher education (Biggs & Tang, 2011), case studies can also be understood as a tool for promoting self-reflection and continuous professional development (Schön, 1987), as they enable critical evaluation and encourage in-depth consideration of theoretical backgrounds and practical activities related to teaching and learning.

Methodology

Research Design

This research was conducted to explore how pre-service teachers of German as a foreign language connect theory and practice using case studies. It employed a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative data from closed-ended survey questions with qualitative insights from students' responses to open-ended questions. The study was conducted with first-year university Master's students enrolled in the Seminar on the Didactics of German during the summer semester of the 2023/2024 academic year.

The Seminar is a compulsory part of the German master's degree program. It consists of 30 hours and is dedicated to reading scientific literature, deepening the topics covered in lectures, and integrating theory and practice. In this Seminar, a novel pedagogical approach was introduced: case studies.

Participants

The study involved 15 out of 19 students who were regularly enrolled in a German language teaching program during the academic year 2023/2024. Although the sample size is relatively small, most students who tried the new case study method participated. Therefore, the results provide a good insight into the effectiveness of the method used in linking theory and practice for future teachers of German.

Case Study Design and Procedure

The case studies were carefully designed to reflect the complex realities of language teaching and learning and were directly aligned with the content covered in lectures. Each case study addressed specific challenges teachers of German as a foreign language commonly face in the classroom. Ten different studies were developed based on the following criteria: relevance for teaching German as a foreign language, complexity of the problem, and authenticity. The cases focused on critical challenges and practises in teaching German as a foreign language, including vocabulary acquisition through contextual learning, overcoming beginners' grammar challenges, integrating technology into language classrooms, addressing the needs of multilingual learners, assessing oral proficiency in large classes, motivating learners with limited exposure to German, integrating culture into language teaching, supporting learners with learning disabilities, developing writing skills through task-based learning, and diverse assessment methods. Each case study included a detailed scenario description that mirrored typical classroom challenges. The scenarios included guiding questions for the analysis and expected learning outcomes. The goal was to engage students with real-life teaching problems requiring theoretical knowledge and practical solutions.

To illustrate, we present one sample case study in the Seminar (See Table 1). Since the seminar is conducted in German and all materials are in German, we have included an English translation for the article.

Table 1 Example of case studies

Original case study in German language	**English Translation of the case study**
Herr Kos ist DaF-Lehrer in einer Sprachschule und unterrichtet eine Gruppe von 15 Lernenden auf dem Niveau B1. Die Gruppe ist sehr heterogen, was sowohl die sprachlichen Vorkenntnisse als auch die kulturellen Hintergründe der Lernenden betrifft. Herr Kos plant, die Fortschritte der Lernenden durch verschiedene Test- und Bewertungsmethoden zu messen. **Situation:** Herr Kos hat beschlossen, eine schriftliche Prüfung, eine mündliche Prüfung und eine kontinuierliche Bewertung im Unterricht zu kombinieren, um ein umfassendes Bild der Sprachkenntnisse seiner Lernenden zu bekommen. • **Schriftliche Prüfung:** Die schriftliche Prüfung besteht aus drei Teilen: 1. **Leseverstehen:** Ein Text über das Leben in Deutschland mit	Mr Kos is a GFL teacher at a language school and teaches a group of 15 learners at level B1. The group is very heterogeneous, both in terms of the learners' previous language skills and their cultural background. Mr Kos plans to measure the learners' progress using various test and assessment methods. **The situation:** Mr Kos has decided to combine a written exam, an oral exam and continuous assessment in class to get a comprehensive picture of his learners' language skills. • **Written exam:** The written exam consists of three parts:

dazugehörigen Verständnisfragen.
2. **Grammatik und Wortschatz:** Aufgaben zur Anwendung der Grammatik und zum Wortschatz, die im Unterricht behandelt wurden.
3. **Schreiben:** Ein Aufsatz über ein vorgegebenes Thema, z.B. "Mein Lieblingsort in meiner Heimatstadt".

- **Mündliche Prüfung:**

Die mündliche Prüfung besteht aus zwei Teilen:

1. **Dialog:** Ein Rollenspiel, in dem die Lernenden in Paaren eine alltägliche Situation nachstellen, z.B. einen Einkauf im Supermarkt.
2. **Präsentation:** Eine kurze Präsentation über ein selbstgewähltes Thema, z.B. ein Hobby oder ein besonderes Ereignis in ihrem Leben.

- **Kontinuierliche Bewertung:**

Herr Kos führt während des Unterrichts regelmäßige Beobachtungen und kurze Tests durch, um die Fortschritte der Lernenden zu dokumentieren. Dazu gehören:

1. **Hausaufgaben:** Regelmäßige Korrektur und Rückmeldung zu den Hausaufgaben.
2. **Mündliche Beiträge im Unterricht:** Teilnahme und aktive Beiträge der Lernenden im Unterrichtsgespräch.
3. **Gruppenarbeit:** Bewertung der Zusammenarbeit und der Ergebnisse in Gruppenprojekten.

Aufgaben für Studierende:

1. **Analyse:** Analysieren Sie die verschiedenen Bewertungsmethoden (schriftliche Prüfung, mündliche Prüfung, kontinuierliche Bewertung) hinsichtlich ihrer Vor- und Nachteile. Welche Fähigkeiten werden durch die jeweilige Methode besonders gut getestet?
2. **Verbesserungsvorschläge:** Entwickeln Sie Vorschläge, wie Herr Kos die Bewertung im Unterricht weiter verbessern könnte. Berücksichtigen Sie dabei Aspekte wie Fairness, Motivation der Lernenden und Praktikabilität.
3. **Eigenes Konzept:** Entwerfen Sie ein eigenes Konzept für die Bewertung

1. **reading comprehension:** A text about life in Germany with related comprehension questions.
2. **grammar and vocabulary:** tasks to apply the grammar and vocabulary covered in class.
3. writing: An essay on a given topic, e.g. "My favourite place in my home town".

- **Oral exam:**

The oral exam consists of two parts:

1. **dialogue**: A role-play in which learners act out an everyday situation in pairs, e.g. shopping at the supermarket.
2. **presentation**: A short presentation on a topic of their choice, e.g. a hobby or a special event in their lives.

- **Continuous assessment:**

Mr Kos conducts regular observations and short tests during lessons to document learners' progress. This includes:

1. **homework**: Regular correction and feedback on homework.
2. **oral contributions in class:** participation and active contributions of learners in class discussions.
3. **group work:** Assessment of collaboration and results in group projects.

Tasks for the students:

1. **analysis**: analyse the different assessment methods (written exam, oral exam, continuous assessment) in terms of their advantages and disadvantages. Which skills are tested particularly well by each method?
2. **suggestions for improvement:** Develop suggestions on how Mr Kos could further improve assessment in the classroom. Consider aspects such as fairness, learner motivation and practicality.
3. **your own concept:** Design your own concept for assessment in GFL lessons for a group of learners at

	im DaF-Unterricht für eine Gruppe von Lernenden auf dem Niveau B1. Berücksichtigen Sie dabei verschiedene Test- und Bewertungsmethoden und begründen Sie Ihre Wahl.	B1 level. Consider different testing and assessment methods and justify your choice.

This case reflects the challenge teachers face who wish to introduce alternative formative assessment methods in addition to traditional summative assessments such as written tests and oral questioning. With these methods, teachers can monitor student progress more comprehensively and capture a broader range of knowledge and skills compared to classic assessment forms. The case study encourages future teachers to consider how to implement such assessments, what to focus on, and the potential difficulties or dilemmas they might encounter. Additionally, it promotes critical thinking about knowledge evaluation in the classroom and reflection on social fairness.

Procedure in seminars

During each seminar session, students were divided into groups and given a case study, which they worked on. They worked collaboratively for 90 minutes, analyzed the case study, discussed the solutions, and prepared short presentations. Each group then presented their ideas and proposed solutions. Students were encouraged to use course materials, scholarly articles, and online sources to support their analysis. This approach ensured that their solutions were grounded in theory and evidence-based practices.

In the final 45 minutes, each group presented their findings to the class, followed by a lively debate. Students were asked questions by their peers and the instructor, defending their solutions with references to relevant literature. This process helped students engage with complex classroom scenarios and develop their ability to argue and defend their pedagogical decisions based on theoretical and practical considerations. Furthermore, it enabled students to connect theoretical knowledge with real-life classroom challenges and enhanced their readiness to handle similar situations in their future careers.

Instruments and Data Collection

To determine the effectiveness of the case studies in linking theory and practice, we developed a questionnaire consisting of 12 closed and five open questions. The questionnaire was distributed to students in paper form during the last seminar session in June 2024. The respondents answered the closed questions by selecting the appropriate answer on a five-point Likert scale. Open questions were answered in complete sentences or bullet points. The answers were transferred into Excel, and the closed questions were processed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data from the open-ended questions and classroom observations were analyzed using thematic coding. Responses were categorized into themes: critical thinking, practical application, peer collaboration, and self-reflection. This qualitative analysis helped to contextualize the quantitative findings and provided a richer understanding of student experiences. In addition to the questionnaire, qualitative data were collected through classroom observations and informal conversations with the students after the seminar.

Results

The closed questions from 1 to 11 were analyzed by calculating the mean value and the standard deviation. Percentages were used to visualize the distribution of responses.
Table 2 shows the mean value, the standard deviation, and the percentage distribution for questions from 1 to 11. As can be seen from the high mean values for all questions (the lowest value is M=4.07), the case study method proved to be a beneficial method that enables a good integration of theory and practice. The relatively low standard deviation for most of the questions also indicates that the student's answers are not widely dispersed but that they evaluate the method very similarly.

Table 2 Results for Questions 1 to 11

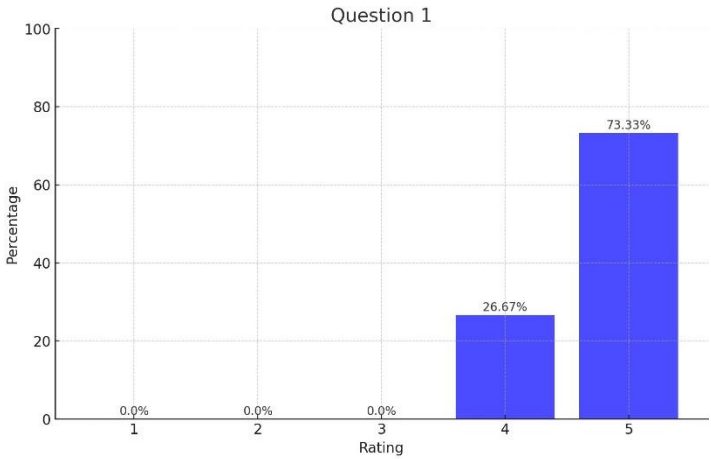
Question	**Mean**	**Standard Deviation**	**1 (%)**	**2 (%)**	**3 (%)**	**4 (%)**	**5 (%)**
Q1 How helpful did you find the case studies overall for your understanding of the theoretical content?	4.73	0.44	0.0	0.0	0.0	26.67	73.33
Q2 How well were you able to apply the theories covered in the case studies to practical teaching situations?	4.21	0.56	0.0	0.0	7.14	64.29	28.57
Q3 To what extent did the case studies increase your confidence in your ability to apply theory in the classroom?	4.27	0.44	0.0	0.0	0.0	73.33	26.67
Q4 How realistic did you find the case studies presented?	4.07	0.44	0.0	0.0	6.67	80.0	13.33
Q5 To what extent did the case studies help to improve your critical thinking and problem- solving skills?	4.07	0.68	0.0	0.0	20.0	53.33	26.67
Q6 How helpful was the feedback you received after working on the case studies?	4.47	0.50	0.0	0.0	0.0	46.67	53.33
Q7 Do you feel that the case studies have enhanced your ability to reflect on your own teaching practise?	4.47	0.50	0.0	0.0	0.0	53.33	46.67
Q8 How motivating did you find the case studies compared to	4.27	0.57	0.0	0.0	6.67	60.0	33.33

other teaching methods (e.g. lectures, presentations)?							
Q9 How useful did you find the discussions and exchanges with fellow students in relation to the case studies?	4.36	0.61	0.0	0.0	7.14	50.0	42.86
Q10 Would you recommend the use of case studies in other teacher education courses and contexts?	4.87	0.34	0.0	0.0	0.0	13.33	86.67
Q11 Did the case studies help to develop your teaching skills?	4.13	0.88	0.0	6.67	13.33	40.0	40.0

Further is an analysis of the responses and a graphical representation for each question.

In response to question 1 *How helpful did you find the case studies overall for your understanding of the theoretical content?* students answer very positively. As can be seen from Figure 1, the vast majority of students rate the case studies as 5 (very helpful), and the rest as 4 (helpful). There were no students with ratings lower than 4.

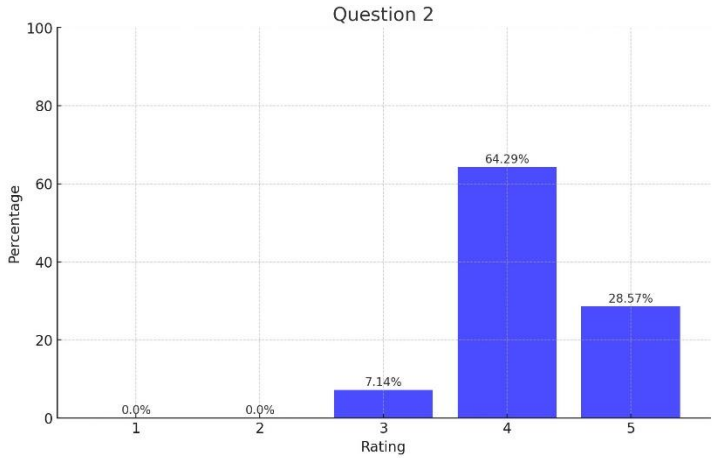
Figure 1 Percentage Distribution for Question 1
How helpful did you find the case studies overall for your understanding of the theoretical content?



Answering question 2 *How well were you able to apply the theories covered in the case studies to practical teaching situations*? shows that the majority of students think that case studies enable a good transfer of theoretical knowledge to practical teaching, a few students consider this method of knowledge transfer to be excellent and a few students rate it as neutral (see Figure 2).

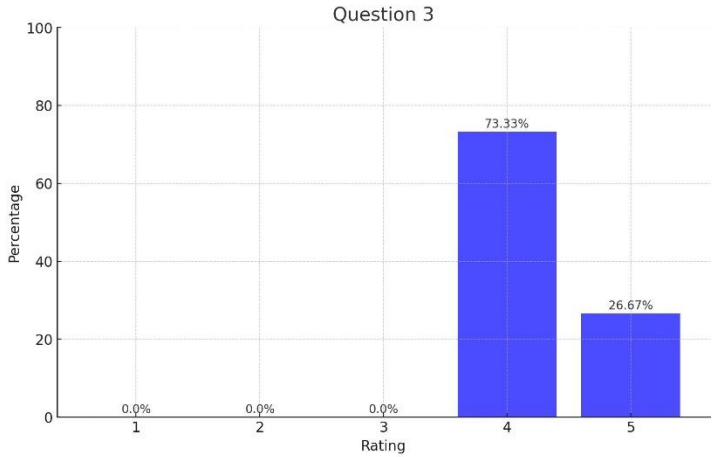
Figure 2 Percentage Distribution for Question 2

How well were you able to apply the theories covered in the case studies to practical teaching situations?



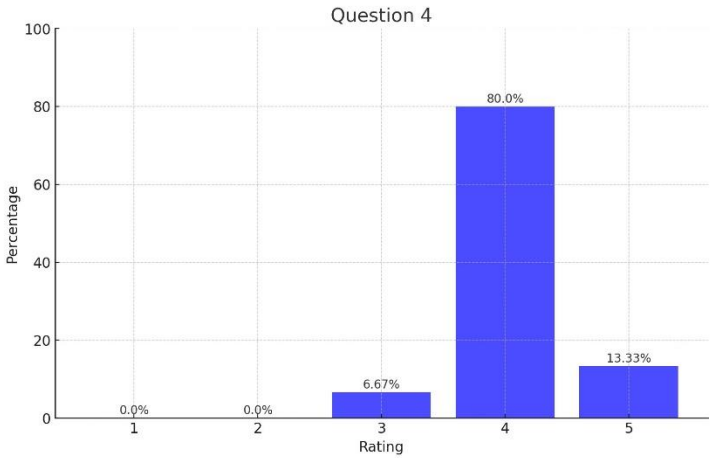
We were further interested in question 3: *To what extent did the case studies increase your confidence in your ability to apply theory in practise in the classroom?*. The distribution of student responses again shows that the case study method has a good impact on students' confidence to transfer theoretical knowledge into practise. The majority rated it a 4 and the rest a 5.

Figure 3 Percentage Distribution for Q3
To what extent did the case studies increase your confidence in your ability to apply theory in practise in the classroom?



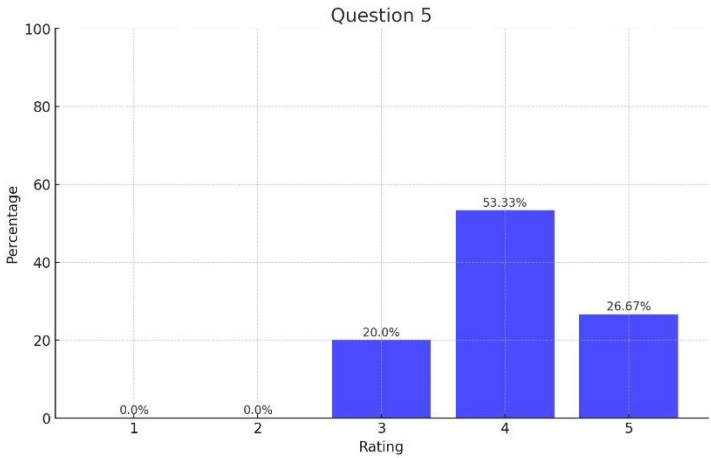
The answers to question 4 on how realistic the cases solved by the students in the case studies are, show a slightly wider spread distribution (Figure 4). Some students rated it a 3 (middle), while slightly more gave it a 5 (very well). However, the vast majority believe that the cases accurately reflect school reality.

Figure 4 Percentage Distribution for Q4



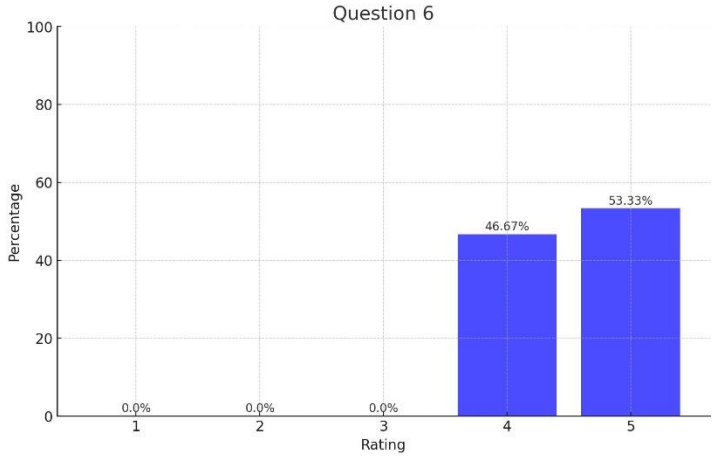
The answers to the fifth question *To what extent did the case studies help to improve your critical thinking and problem solving skills?* show that a slightly higher proportion of students (N=20%) felt that the case studies had no particular impact on the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Nevertheless, more than half of the respondents felt that they had a significant impact and 26.67% felt that they had a very significant impact on this aspect.

Figure 5 Percentage Distribution for Q5



The effectiveness of feedback, as assessed in question 6 *(How helpful was the feedback you received after working on the case studies?)*, was rated as very effective by 53% of the students and effective by 46.67%. It is noteworthy that none of the participants rated the feedback lower than 4. These responses highlight that good feedback can indeed be a powerful tool for self-reflection and self-evaluation. The feedback given during the discussions by both the teacher and fellow students was comprehensive and addressed various aspects of the problems that the students encountered in solving the case studies.

Figure 6 Percentage Distribution for Q6



The case study is also seen by students as an effective method for reflecting on teaching practise. In response to question 7 *Do you feel that the case studies have enhanced your ability to reflect on your own teaching practise?* the case study was rated as an effective method by 53.33% of students and very effective by 46.67%. Almost identically, but in reverse order of the two highest scores (see Figure 8), the students rate the case study method in comparison to other teaching methods.

Figure 7 Percentage Distribution for Q7

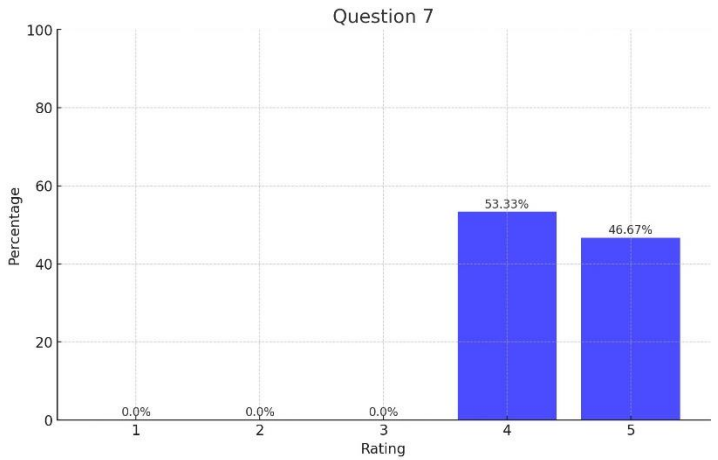
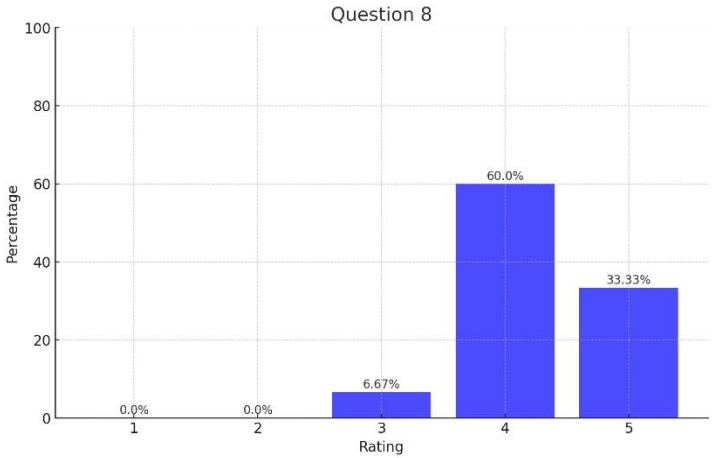


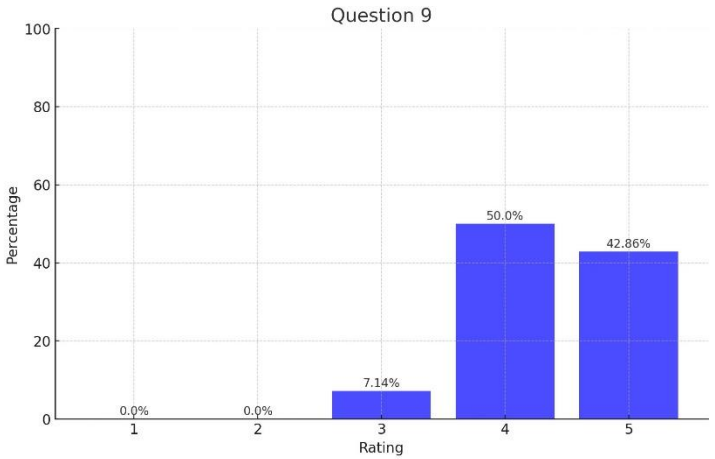
Figure 8 Percentage Distribution for Q8

How motivating did you find the case studies compared to other teaching methods (e.g. lectures, presentations)?



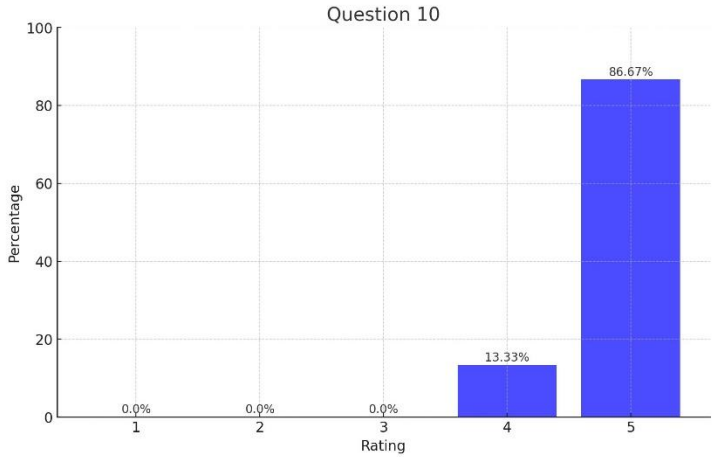
The distribution of student responses to question 9 (*How useful did you find the discussions and exchanges with fellow students in relation to the case studies?*) shows that students rate the effectiveness of the case study method in stimulating discussion and exchange of views with fellow students very highly. 92.86% of the students think that the method provides very good and good opportunities for discussion, while 7.41% of the students think that the interaction with colleagues was average.

Figure 9 Percentage Distribution for Q9



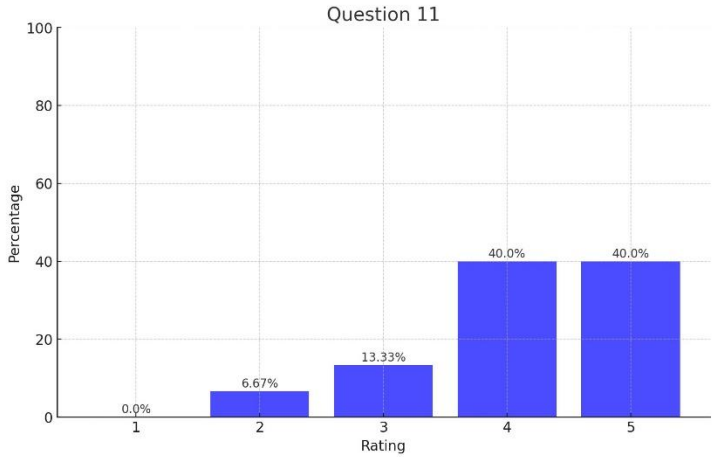
The students' responses to question 10 show a strong preference for the use of the case study method and recommend its introduction in other forms of work at the university. All students felt that the method should be introduced in other lectures and seminars, as they all rated it a 4 or 5.

Figure 10 Percentage Distribution for Q10
Would you recommend the use of case studies in other teacher education courses and contexts?



Compared to the other questions, question 11 shows a greater spread of answers. 80% of students rated the method as 4 or 5, indicating that the introduction of the case study had a significant impact on the development of their teaching skills. However, 13.33% of students feel that the method has not had a particularly significant impact, and 6.67% consider it less effective for the development of teaching skills.

Figure 11 Percentage Distribution for Q11
Did the case studies help to develop your teaching skills?



Question 12 (*Which aspects of the case studies did you find particularly useful? Multiple selections possible)* allowed students to select several answers to indicate which aspects of the use of case studies they found most effective. The responses show that the largest proportion of students consider case studies to be a good way of demonstrating practise (15 responses). They also provide a good quality of group work and an opportunity for self-reflection (9 responses). Feedback was frequently selected (9 times), suggesting that students value and want feedback. Five students selected discussion of the theoretical background, suggesting that case studies enable, among other things, that when a group is working on a particular problem, the

discussion is differentiated and focussed so that the aspects most needed by a particular group are uncovered.

Table 3 Result for Question 12 ***Which aspects of the case studies did you find particularly useful? (Multiple selections possible):***

Possibilities	**Count**	**Percentage (%)**
Practical relevance	15	100.00
Discussion of theories	5	33.33
Received feedback	9	60.00
Opportunities for self-reflection	9	60.00
Collaboration with fellow students	9	60.00
Others	0	0.00

The analysis of the answers to the open questions provided deeper insights into evaluating the effectiveness of the case study method. The responses were classified into four categories: critical thinking, practical application, peer collaboration, and self-reflection.

Critical thinking: Responses related to critical thinking indicated that students desired more pre-selected material and additional time to explore individual case studies in depth. Too little time was spent searching for appropriate literature, reading the literature, and discussing the content. Some felt they could only develop their critical thinking more effectively. Although they had to think carefully about how to solve the problem and justify their solution, the time constraints contributed to needing more time to be satisfied with their work.

Practical application: The responses relating to gaining practical experience confirm the effectiveness of the case study method. In particular, the case studies that dealt with specific problems of teaching German were found to be very useful by the students, as they will be faced with challenges at the beginning of their professional careers, especially when it comes to how to explain certain linguistic phenomena in German to their students. Those case studies that were more open-ended and had a variety of possible solutions were perceived as more complex and less interesting. They felt uncomfortable and insecure when solving them, as they did not know which way to think. Although the students had to argue and theoretically support their solutions, it is clear from their responses that their personal beliefs and experiences still dominate and have a significant influence on their approach to solving classroom situations.

Peer collaboration: Students found group work in solving cases very effective, as it allowed them to share their views, find solutions together, and help each other. However, they pointed out that changing the group's composition would be good each time. Each group has its dynamic and can make an essential contribution to solving a case study if the group's work is coordinated and the members of the group respect and listen to each other.

Self-reflection: Although the case studies provide opportunities for self-reflection, students felt that the cases they worked on facilitated reflection on theoretical knowledge but less on practice. The students' answers indicate that they associate reflection primarily with gaining practical experience, particularly concerning their teaching.

Discussion

The overall helpfulness of case studies was highly appreciated. In particular, the high mean values for questions 1 and 10 (see Table 2) indicate that students rate the case study method as very effective for understanding the theoretical principles and would like to learn through this method in other university courses. From conversations with the students before the seminar, we know that working with case studies was a new approach for them, as they were unfamiliar with it during their studies. As the data shows, they responded very positively to the method. They would like to see a similar integration of theory and practice in other subjects within their degree program, as it has proven very effective.

This enthusiasm for the case study method suggests that it has the potential to enhance engagement across multiple subjects within the degree program, particularly those that similarly struggle to connect theoretical instruction with practical application. Given the rising demand for experiential learning across higher education, incorporating case studies into more courses could foster a broader cultural shift towards student-centered learning, where students take more responsibility for applying knowledge actively and reflectively in real-world situations. Such a shift could also encourage more collaborative learning, where students engage with the material and learn from each other's approaches, thus promoting a deeper understanding of diverse pedagogical strategies.

The case study method was moderately effective in enhancing critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

The findings of this study align with previous research on the effectiveness of case studies in teacher education, particularly in fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Bruning et al., 2008; Fixen, 2024). However, unlike studies focusing primarily on law and medicine, this research highlights the unique challenges and opportunities of applying the case study method in foreign language methodology. The results suggest that while the case study method effectively improves students' ability to connect theory with practice, it also exposes gaps in their ability to evaluate and critically adapt teaching strategies to diverse classroom situations. This reinforces the need for more tailored case study designs that address the specific contexts of foreign language teaching, such as multilingualism and intercultural competence, which often need to be explored in general teacher education programs.

Contrary to our expectations and the findings of Bruning et al. (2008), 20 % of students reported that they had developed only average critical thinking and problem-solving skills through case studies. This suggests that while case studies can be practical, there is room for improvement in their design and implementation. To develop these skills, it would be beneficial to design cases that are more complex or better tailored to specific challenges. Addressing topics that students rarely encounter during their studies, such as students with special needs, multilingualism in the classroom, and testing, could provide more prosperous opportunities for critical thinking and problem-solving. Students highlighted these areas in their responses to the open-ended questions, indicating a need for broader and deeper engagement with diverse educational scenarios.

It has also proven particularly effective to supplement the solving of case studies with discussion and feedback. Students reported that their ability to self-reflect and their motivation to learn increased. Their responses reflect high satisfaction with the case study method, emphasizing its motivating and helpful nature. The slight differences in the rating distribution indicate that while both aspects are valued, the discussions and exchanges with fellow students are particularly appreciated for their usefulness in learning.

A slightly more significant difference in the standard deviation can be seen in question 11, which asks about the development of teaching skills through the case study method. These results are similar to the findings of Bruning et al. (2008). We

assume that students have a slightly narrower understanding of teaching skills, which relates directly to the delivery of lessons but not so much to planning and evaluation and to solving potential problem situations in the classroom. Even though all the case studies used in the seminar addressed different aspects of the didactic competencies of future teachers, it would have been beneficial to explicitly highlight, through the discussion and in the design of the case studies, which competencies were being addressed through the case studies and how they are directly related to the teacher's work in the classroom.

Given the positive feedback on peer discussions, incorporating structured group discussion sessions where students can critique and learn from each other's approaches to the case studies could further enhance the learning experience. This could help broaden their understanding of teaching skills beyond the immediate lesson delivery to include planning, evaluation, and problem-solving. As already highlighted by Setiawan et al. (2023), it can help students reflect on their practices more effectively.

The data show that the case study method improves students' understanding of theoretical principles and motivates their learning process. However, there is still room for improvement in promoting critical thinking and problem-solving skills and enhancing students' understanding of teaching skills.

We present some recommendations for introducing and implementing case studies in foreign language teacher education based on our experiences with prospective teachers of German.

To create the most authentic depiction of reality through case studies, these should address context-specific issues related to the particular foreign language, as future teachers will encounter such challenges daily. For example, how to effectively explain the formation and use of the past tense in German to a student or how to design activity-oriented tasks on leisure time. This way, students will be more motivated to seek potential solutions, as they will feel that these are real challenges they will face as teachers of a particular foreign language.

For an in-depth exploration of specific issues and a critical evaluation of the material, it is advisable to provide case studies with a selection of relevant literature in advance. If students have to find all the literature themselves, they may run out of time for in-depth reading, valuable experience exchange, and reasoned debate.

When designing a case study, planning sufficient time for research, debate, solution-seeking, presentation, and feedback is essential. Each step significantly contributes to the effectiveness of this method.

Furthermore, we recommend designing case studies that allow various solutions and encourage students to justify their choices. It is advisable to explicitly indicate to students which didactic areas are addressed by individual case studies and which competencies they develop.

Suppose case studies are an integral part of the educational program. In that case, it is advisable to carefully plan the formative assessment of student progress, which precise assessment criteria can support.

The case study method can be further optimized by addressing these areas to provide a more comprehensive experience in merging theory and practice.

Conclusion

The introduction of a new case study method in the seminar on the Didactics of German proved effective as it successfully achieved the seminar's objectives as set out in the course syllabus. The case studies encouraged students to search for relevant literature and read articles, enabling them to transfer theoretical knowledge into practical teaching situations. The case studies motivated students to learn and gave them a good insight into classroom practice and situations they might encounter as

teachers. As students often report that teacher education is too theoretically oriented, the case studies proved to be an excellent way to give students an insight into why knowing the theoretical background is essential for solving challenges in the classroom. The peer collaboration, interaction with colleagues, collaborative problem-solving, and feedback were particularly appreciated. These findings can contribute to further thinking about how to support learning at the university level. The development of critical thinking and teaching skills within this method were slightly less valued, and future case studies should be designed to take these areas into greater account.

While the case study method has proven valuable for merging theory and practice in foreign language teacher education, this study has some limitations. The small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the focus on German language teaching may not directly apply to other foreign languages, where teaching challenges and classroom dynamics might differ. Despite the small sample size, the study's results indicate a need to shift away from lecture-based teaching and encourage more experiential learning approaches.

Future research should explore the use of case studies in diverse language teaching contexts, including less commonly taught languages and multilingual classrooms. Additionally, longitudinal studies could investigate the long-term effects of case study-based learning on teaching effectiveness and career development. Expanding the research scope will provide deeper insights into how to optimize the case study method across various educational settings and ensure its effectiveness in developing critical teaching competencies in different languages and cultures.

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Words: 6552
Characters: *44 726 (25 standard pages)*

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