

Utilizing Problem-based Learning (PBL) in a University English Interpretation Class

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on investigating the feasibility of utilizing Problem-based Learning (PBL) approach in a university English interpretation class in Taiwan. In contrast to lectured-based teaching, PBL is a student-centered teaching approach that helps students study school subjects and assimilate knowledge by doing independent and collaborative research. In medical programs, PBL is considered an effective pedagogy and is frequently used by instructors to develop medical students' abilities to solve complex problems that include multifaceted issues through limited clues. In foreign languages programs, English interpretation class is also a very difficult studying subject which requires students not only to have sufficient knowledge in languages but also possess the accurate interpreting skills from the source language to the target language. Inspired by PBL's success in medical programs, the researchers experimented PBL in an English interpretation class for a semester to examine its feasibility in actual utilization. In this research, four variables: (1) students' attitudes, (2) students' satisfaction, (3) students' motivation, and (4) students' self-achievement were investigated through qualitative-oriented analyses. The major findings indicate that students' attitudes toward PBL are positive which influences their motivation in learning and that ultimately elevates their English interpreting skills.

Keywords: *Problem-based Learning (PBL), Interpreting skills, English Interpretation Class*

INTRODUCTION

Thanks to the significant influences of globalization and economic interests, there has been a great demand for Chinese and English interpreters in Taiwan. Nowadays, the majority of applied foreign language programs in colleges and universities have made interpreting studies a mandatory course in the second or third academic years. However, studies showed that many of the instructors teaching interpreting courses are those who specified in ESL or ESP; most of them have little related background with translation and their teaching approaches tend to be rigid. The worst of all may be the fact that some instructors focus too much on grammatical structures than making appropriate interpretation of meanings (Wang, 2007).

Colina (2003) stated that many higher education institutes nowadays appeared to have high interest in developing new courses, minors and majors in order to set up translation programs especially in applied foreign language departments. However, most of those educational institutes have to face serious issues that they could not recruit enough qualified instructors to design systematic and consistent teaching approaches for translation courses. The situation seems to get worse when administrators have to recruit those instructors who have no translation backgrounds and teach translation courses through language

exercises. In such a case, students may be confused and might misunderstand the purpose of translation.

Lee & Liao (2010) indicated that based on learners' perspectives, the challenges that often occurs in interpreting courses are insufficient trainings in interpreting skills and lack of knowledge in the professional fields. Some students self-reflected that they felt frustrated in the class because they felt they were not learning much about interpreting skills but were rather like studying the English language itself. More often than not, the reason many students were frustrated in English interpreting classes is not because of their poor linguistic skills, but rather contributes to the lack of cultural awareness. Students may have proficient language abilities but they lack the skills to convey appropriate meanings from one language to the other in time-sensitive scenarios. After all, an interpreter's job is mainly to translate a native speaker's thoughts to an expression with an equivalent or an approximate equivalent meaning in the target language. Consequently, interpreting courses should not be taught in the same way as ESL classes did. Instead, interpreting skills should focus on the effectiveness of communication (Liao, 2011).

Since teaching interpreting skills should place a great emphasis on students' abilities to convey comparable meanings between the source and the target languages, the researchers adapted a student-centered teaching called Problem-based Learning (PBL) approach in a university English interpretation class.

The research questions of this study are as follows:

1. Is Problem-based Learning (PBL) approach feasible in an English interpretation class?
2. If PBL is applicable, what should instructors do to ensure a smooth operation of PBL among groups and group members?

To examine the effectiveness of PBL, the researchers carried out a semester qualitative research to study four variables that are considered highly related to the feasibility of PBL in interpreting courses. The four variables are listed below: (1) students' attitudes toward PBL, (2) students' satisfaction with PBL, (3) students motivation toward learning through PBL, and (4) students' self-achievement with PBL (see figure one).

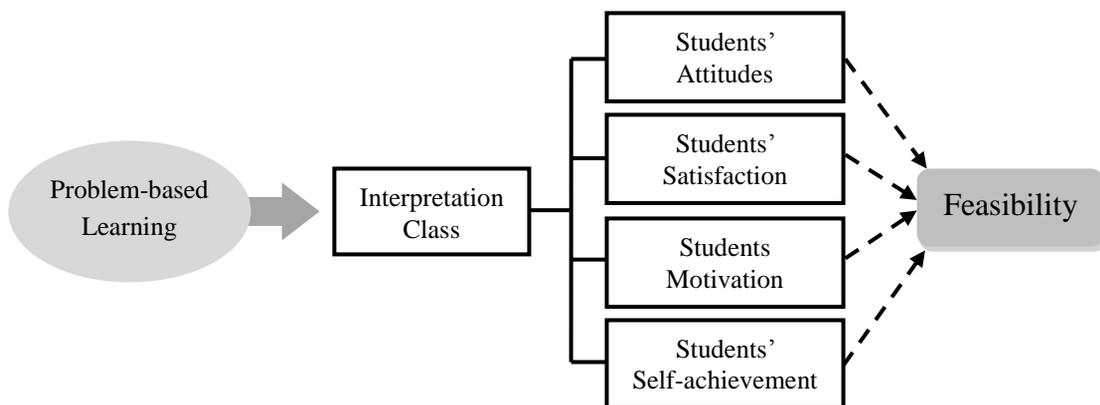


Figure 1: The Conceptual Framework of This Study (Organized by the researchers)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since there is a great demand for bilingual employees (Mandarin Chinese and English) in Taiwan, English has become a mandatory subject in the island's educational system. English acquisition in Taiwan

starts as early as the third grade in elementary school and it continues through college education (Ministry of Education 2011). Traditionally, English acquisition has always focused on four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Especially, in a whole English teaching class which is popular in Taiwan, learners are encouraged to think like a native English speaker and are discouraged to use their mother tongues. Although trainings of these four skills can help learners enhance their linguistic abilities in the target language, none of them enables learners to make quality language interpretation from the source language to the target language.

In order to apply one's linguistic skills to the real life, nowadays, scholars have proposed to add translation and interpreting as additional skills in language acquisition (Davis & Liao, 2009). As a result, most colleges and universities have started to offer interpretation classes in their foreign language programs. The most difficult challenges to make a sound and professional interpretation may include individual responses, cultural awareness, and time constraint (Wu, 2000). Writers and translators may have as much time as necessary to check, modify, and convey meanings from one language to the other. However, interpreters are required to deliver accurate and proper information to their clients among two or more languages in a time-sensitive situation. Moreover, because of grammatical differences, the Chinese language tends to use many verbs in one sentence while the English language prefers to utilize nouns and only allow one main verb in a single sentence. The order of language structure in Chinese sentences usually starts with (1) time, (2) place, and (3) action, but English is the opposite: (1) action, (2) place, and (3) time. For example, due to the cultural differences, a Chinese native speaker is very likely to say, "The Earth *rotates* on its own axis and it *creates* four seasons..." while a native English speaker prefers to say, "The *rotation* of the Earth on its own axis *results* in four seasons." In addition, while one could place "time concept" in the beginning or in the end of an English sentence, one can only mention "time concept" in the beginning of a Chinese sentence. For instance, in English, one may either say, "My father just came back from the U.S. yesterday." or say, "Yesterday, my father just came back from the U.S." In Chinese, the speaker can only say, "Yesterday, my father just came back from the U.S." It was no surprise that Wu (2000) reported that because the two languages are so different in social and cultural backgrounds, besides language proficiency, cultural awareness is especially important in English-Chinese interpretation.

Although teaching interpreting skills should take both learners' language proficiency and cultural differences into consideration, current undergraduate interpreting courses still appear to be taught in a teacher-centered approach which learners are trained to parrot their instructors' versions of interpreting. Liu (2002) stated that "Interpretation courses have become very popular in the foreign language curricula of Taiwanese undergraduate programs. However, lack of careful curriculum planning and hasty implementation of interpretation courses have led to some problems (p.1)." In order to turn the situation around, the researchers suggested adapting the PBL approach as a remedy in interpretation classes.

Problem-based learning (PBL) is a learner-centered, self-directed, and collaborative learning approach which was first utilized by Howard Barrows and other researchers in a medical school program at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada back in the 1960s (Barrows, 1996). Unlike traditional teaching pedagogies, PBL was designed to engage students in active learning and knowledge construction in higher level thinking. In a real life situation, there are usually more than one way to solve multifaceted problems that involve different issues. Consequently, when applying PBL in interpreting courses, teachers are not supposed to only lecture in the classes. Instead, teachers should work as tutors who (1) offer authentic exercises; (2) group students in small teams; (3) help students select a group leader; (4) encourage group learning; (5) assist students to identify main problems; (6) monitor the

process; (7) support the discussion and (8) facilitate students solving problems through collaborative and cooperative ways (Schmidt & Moust, 2000). In fact, students are supposed to self direct their learning goals and take responsibilities for their learning progress through discussions in several meetings (see figure two). In a PBL class setting, the group leaders and group members should clarify the problems, review related literatures, assign investigating workload, conduct independent and group research, brainstorm potential hypotheses, discuss possible results, and synthesize collaborated solutions related to the problems (Schmidt, 1983).

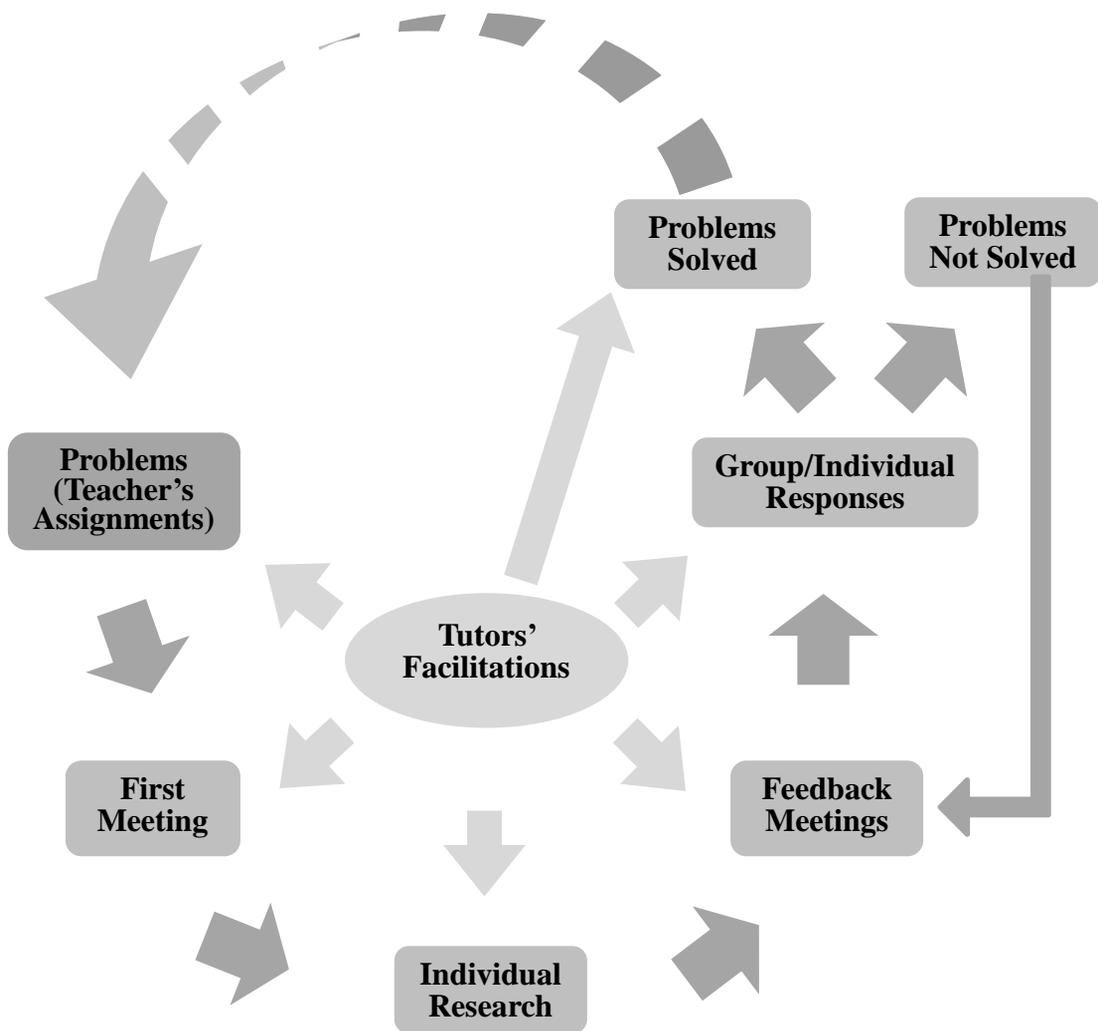


Figure 2: Teacher's Problem-based Learning (PBL) Guidelines(Organized by the researchers)

Considering the flexibility of the two languages, there is no standard translation for different situations in the real life. Interpreters often find themselves dealing with some untranslatable messages between two cultures. In such a case, interpreters must find ways to modify the incoming messages and to translate them to the most equivalent comparisons in order to keep the flow of conversation between two parties. For example, it is difficult to translate the Chinese word “*Zhen Jie Pai Fang*” into English

because there is no such a thing in western culture. The interpreter can only describe what it is and perhaps coin a new word for it. Zhen Jie Pai Fang was actually a stone arch built by previous imperial governments in honor of chaste widows who took care of the family and never got married again in their lives. In order to make such a long description concise, a group of students in their PBL meetings have coined a new word for it and they called Zhen Jie Pai Fang “Chastity Arch” in English. The reason they called it “Chastity Arch” was they related some common facts between chastity belt in western culture and Zhen Jie Pai Fang in the east. Through PBL exercises, students were not only able to make smooth interpretations but also had sharpened their language proficiencies.

Moreover, because of the unique culture in Asia, more often than not, a speaker tends to be humble and sometimes sounds to be a bit self-abased in the beginning of his or her speech. In such a case, to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings, interpreters should not literally translate that beginning speech into English. For example, a common opening line in Chinese is usually said in the following: “Ladies and gentlemen, there are a lot of talented employees in my company. I am not qualified to host this meeting. If I have done something wrong, please forgive me.” In such a case, if the interpreter translates the speech literally, unnecessary conflicts are expected to occur as the attendees from western culture wonder why this company would assign such an inexperienced person to host the meeting. Perhaps the company does not value the attendees’ business and does not respect them. Consequently, the interpreter must have cultural awareness that the speaker was just being humble and it is not appropriate to translate what he or she just said literally. Instead, the interpreter should adapt free translation to interpret the speech to an acceptable degree. For another example, a typical Chinese opening remark often begins with the following sentence: “I would like to thank the chairperson 120,000 times for inviting me to this conference.” In Chinese, “thanks 120,000 times” has an equivalent meaning to “thanks a million” in English. These expressions are just established usages. In the real life, it is almost impossible for a person to thank someone for so much time for whatever reason. As the examples indicated above, an interpreter with strong language proficiency but lack of cultural awareness can cause disastrous consequences.

Furthermore, it takes much practice to make qualified interpreters for the society. Since there are no standard translations for different situations, an interpreter should act accordingly to different circumstances. As such, problem-based learning can be an ideal learning candidate in terms of interpretation trainings. In an interpretation class that incorporated with PBL, students receive different interpretation exercises (speakers’ speeches) from their instructors without standard translations. Then students hold several meetings and take turns to act as the speaker and practice as interpreters. Whenever an interpreter stumbles, other group members should help the interpreter continue the interpretation and get the meanings across. In this way, students learn to solve interpretation problems from their cooperated and collaborated discussions for the best versions of interpretation. In PBL meetings, students’ brainstorming helps them develop both subject-specific skills and transferable skills that enable them to sharpen their interpreting skills.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the four research variables: (1) students’ attitudes, (2) students’ satisfaction, (3) students motivation, and (4) students’ self-achievement were investigated through eight semi-structured group interviews. The researchers adapted qualitative analyses which involved class observations, group interviews, and feedbacks summarization to investigate students’ perspectives regarding the feasibility of PBL in an English interpretation class. The instructor of the class has received two advanced PBL

certifications and is currently teaching translation courses and interpreting courses in the university level.

Considering the intensive trainings which usually include consecutive interpretation and simultaneous interpretation, the class size of a graduate interpreting course is usually fewer than ten students; the class size of an undergraduate interpreting course, however, is often limited to about 35 students. This study involved a total of 32 junior university students who majored English in the department of applied foreign languages in a University. In the beginning, the instructor randomly grouped students to groups of four (four students in one group) and a total of eight PBL student groups were organized. In the process of learning, students worked collaboratively in several meetings to interpret the speech transcripts given by their instructor. Then students were required to make presentations respectively for their interpretations from their assignments. During the class, the researchers observed the learning process, devised and piloted the survey questions, and then finalized the formal interview questions.

The researchers conducted formal interviews in the 15th week of the semester when students had experienced sufficient trainings in PBL. In the process of the formal group interviews, the researchers asked the participants questions regarding their attitudes, satisfaction, motivation, and self-achievement toward the incorporation of PBL in their interpretation class. In addition to answering the researchers' interview questions, the participants were provided opportunities to freely express their own opinions about the effectiveness of each variable from their learning experiences. With the participants consent, the researchers videotaped the interviews for further data organization. After the group interviews, the researchers reviewed the records, transcribed collected information in papers, decoded the texts corpus, double checked the contents, and analyzed the research results. Based on the results from students' self-reported information, the researchers not only finalized the conclusions but also made some suggestions hoping this research would serve as a reference for educators who wish to apply PBL in their interpretation teachings.

DATA ANALYSES

After the investigation with eight PBL student groups, the researchers organized the collected data concisely in the following five tables. Table one indicated the number of students and their genders in each group. As indicated in the table, a total of eight groups: 5 male students and 27 female students participated in this study.

Table 1: The Participants' Profiles

Groups	PBL Group Members	Genders	
		Male	Female
1 st	4	0	4
2 nd	4	1	3
3 rd	4	0	4
4 th	4	0	4
5 th	3	3	0
6 th	5	1	4
7 th	4	0	4
8 th	4	0	4

The following tables were designed to investigate the four research variables from students' self-reported information in the group interviews. In each table, students' replies were categorized as "satisfied" or "unsatisfied." The researchers used capital letters to identify whether students' were satisfied with certain interview questions. For example, "S" signifies satisfied and "U" means unsatisfied. In some tables, both letters "S/U" were applied because of the disagreements occurred among the group members in the formal interviews. The following tables were organized summaries from the collected data. The results of the four research variables were investigated in the tables. Each table signified whether students were satisfied, unsatisfied, or disagreed with each other in a concise report.

Table 2: A Concise Summary of Students' Attitudes toward PBL

S/U	Questions Related to Attitudes					
	Are you convinced that an interpreting course incorporated with PBL is effective in your study?		Does PBL meet your learning preferences and spark enthusiasm for learning in your classrooms?		Do you believe PBL has a positive impact on your independent and collaborative research abilities?	
	Effective learning, positive experience, interactive learning ambience.	S	Interesting, incentive, worthwhile, creative, rewarding, worthy.	S	Systematic, good, dynamic, useful, efficient, successful.	S
Additional Comments		Additional Comments		Additional Comments		
This is a unique and unprecedented experience but there are rewarding results in learning.		Although PBL seems stressful in the beginning, we learned much afterward.		PBL broadened our horizons through group works.		

Table 3: A Concise Summary of Students' Satisfaction with PBL

S/U	Questions Related to Satisfaction					
	Are you satisfied with an interpreting course integrated with PBL approach?		Are your group members supportive in your PBL group?		Are you satisfied with the tutor's facilitation and instruction?	
	Agreeable, cheerful, efficient, delightful, confident, positive.	S	Cooperative, anxious, time consuming, criticizable.	S/U	Comprehensible, patient, supportive, knowledgeable.	S
Additional Comments		Additional Comments		Additional Comments		
We are satisfied with the flow of this PBL-oriented class for it helps us improve our interpreting skills.		Group leaders should provide a clear vision and help team members get back on tracks.		The tutor is supportive, thoughtful, and yet not too intrusive.		

Table 4: A Concise Summary of Students Motivation toward Learning through PBL

S/U	Questions Related to Motivation					
	Does this PBL-oriented interpreting course motivate you in learning?		Are you and your group members motivated in the meetings and research?		Are you still motivated to study interpreting skills in PBL approach after this class?	
	Effectively engaged in learning, much motivated, productive.	S	Supportive, vivacious, lazy, incoherent, hard to reach consensus.	S/U	Affirmative, worthy, positive, continuative.	S
Additional Comments		Additional Comments		Additional Comments		
Engaged in PBL has helped us to do critical thinking and strengthened our research abilities.		Most group members are supportive, but a few are lazy. Punishments should be applied to some members.		PBL is a practical learning approach not only in interpreting skills but also in language acquisition.		

Table 5: A Concise Summary of Students' Self-achievement with PBL

Questions Related to Self-achievement						
S/U	Do you achieve your learning goals in this PBL-oriented interpreting course?		Does this class address your learning needs in interpreting skills?		Are your interpreting skills significantly improved in this interpreting course?	
	Successful learning, rewarding experience, appreciated, promising results.	S	Learning needs are satisfied; enjoy quality learning through Positive learning rhythms.	S	Developed better interpreting skills, sharpened skills, achieved learning objectives.	S
Additional Comments			Additional Comments		Additional Comments	
It is our first time to study interpreting skills through PBL but the learning results are rewarding. PBL is appreciated by many of us in the learning process.			With the instructor's facilitation, the class atmosphere is positive which results in quality learning.		With cooperative and collaborative works, we could identify our blind spots, learn from each other, and improve our interpreting skills.	

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The results of this study indicated that PBL is a promising learning approach that can be incorporated in interpreting courses in the university level. According to students' self-reported information and open-ended comments, PBL has provided a rewarding and quality learning experience for students. In terms of learning achievement, students were able to handle critical thinking, discover new strategies when interpreting, and solve interpreting problems through independent research and group works. The only disadvantages of PBL in this study occurred in some group meetings and group interactions. Some students were reported to perform poorly and they seemed to be unwilling to work in groups. Also, sometimes students' discussions could go off track. In some cases, the group leaders failed to remind the group members to get back on the related discussions. As such, when applying PBL in interpreting courses, instructors should pay careful attention to students' cooperation, promote team spirit, and monitor the interactions among each group. In addition, peer reviews or peer assessments may be applied to ensure the smooth operation of PBL in learning.

Although there is a room for the improvement of students' cooperation in PBL-oriented teaching, the results of this study have shown many benefits of the utilization of PBL in an interpreting course. Based on the qualitative analyses, students' attitudes, satisfaction, motivation, and self-achievement altogether were positive toward PBL in their interpreting course. In this study, the value and the effectiveness of PBL have been recognized by learners through their self-reported information. As a result, PBL is confirmed an ideal candidate to remedy the ineffectiveness of traditional interpreting teaching that stifles students' learning enthusiasm. Educators may consider fully or partially apply PBL in their classes in order to effectively build up students' English-Chinese interpreting skills.

Limitations and future research

Despite the fact that PBL is proven feasible in the teaching of interpreting studies, further validation research is needed to better persuade both learners and educators regarding its effectiveness. This research was conducted in qualitative methods in a university's interpretation class. In the future, it will be interesting to compare the learning differences between an experiment group and a control group through the teaching with and without PBL in a quantitative research.

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