# COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING: AN EFFECTIVE APPROACH IN INTERPRETATION CLASSES

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**Abstract** – *It is generally believed that interpreting quality is mostly driven by the level of language competency. Studies supporting this view have been broadly achieved through the use of various teaching approaches and strategies. However, most of these focus on the development of language skills rather than students' topical knowledge, interpreting skill sets or interpreting outcomes. This paper aims at introducing the effectiveness of implementing a competency-based approach into English language classrooms. This approach was implemented into two interpretation groups, who are pursuing English as their major. There are notable outcomes found after employing competency-based approach in interpreting classes. Firstly, students were able to perform the task more fluently and confidently. Secondly, students used more appropriate language to interpret in concrete scenarios; and lastly, students showed strong preferences for advanced preparation and practice materials built upon their knowledge and competence. In order to apply competency-based approach more effectively and widely in interpretation courses, suggestions are made for lecturers and school leaders on the continuous update with respect to syllabuses design, course materials, and teaching assessment. It is hoped that this paper will give some insights on the use of competency-based approach in interpretation classes to equip students with skills and knowledge to successfully perform interpreting works.*

*Keywords: competency-based approach, interpretation, teaching assessment.*

## I. THE DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL DEMANDS FOR INTERPRETING

Current reforms in higher education have fostered the use of innovative teaching methods and adjusted curricula [1–3]. This allows prospective professionals to grow in a changing globe and it requires a bridge to gap ideas between two parties; This results in the need for interpreters. Over the years, interpreting has placed its role in a constantly changing world [1] and it is defined that interpreting is a process in which "two or more people do not use the same language as their mode of discourse to communicate" [4, p.8]. This stands to reason that interpreters are engaging in communicative conversations of human beings from daily interactions to business and political discussions [4].

Although technological development has taken place in every aspect of human beings, and there are various applications to translate from one language to another one, the demand for professional interpreters has enormously grown [1, 5]. Other researchers [4, 6] share the same idea that interpreters are required to adjust themselves to work in various contexts and with different parties. Therefore, interpreters play a crucial position amongst groups. This idea is especially illustrated by Witter and Johnson [7, p.116] (Fig 1).
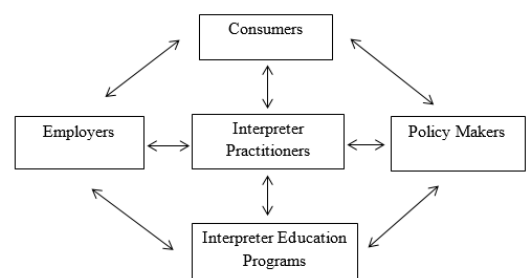


Fig. 1: The interpreting system Witter-Merithew and Johnson

From the above diagram, two researchers have clearly shown the interconnectedness of interpreters in a variety of professions. This proves that formal and professional training in interpreting is on-demand and it should be widely offered in educational institutions.

Similarly, researchers [8–10] have demonstrated the importance of interpreting in different fields in different nations. Taking Malaysia as an example, it is claimed that previously, translation and interpretation were "unknown to many" [2, p.106]; However, due to the increasing demand market for interpreters, the field has attracted many to join this profession. Another reason for fascinating many people to pursue this profession in this country is that the government's target is to "acquire as much knowledge as possible from various parts of the world" [2, p.103]. Therefore, it can be said that this field has been playing a vital role in different areas of the country.

In Vietnam, with changes in society and economic growth, especially since its participation in WTO in 2007, which marks the development in various sectors and attracts investors worldwide [1, 11, 12]. This increases the chances of using English to work in an international market and hence the demand for the interpreting profession is on the rise. As a result, the interpreting program has been introduced and trained as one of the majors in several higher institutions in Vietnam [1, 12, 13].

## II.  INTERPRETING TRAINING COURSES OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROGRAM AT TRA VINH UNIVERSITY

This section presents the general characteristics of an interpreter, current context and challenges of teaching interpretation courses at Tra Vinh University.

### A. Characteristics of an interpreter

**Language and social knowledge**

A number of studies [1, 4, 6, 13, 14] have shown that to become an interpreting professional, students are required to reach minimum language requirements according to their chosen institution.

The Monterey Institute of International Studies [MIIS], as cited in [2, p.104] presents the standard instruction including ten guidelines to equip students with skills and knowledge to become interpreters. The detailed guidelines are grouped into three main categories, including working languages, skills, and life-long learning. It is explained that interpreters are required to be competent in the working language. Linguistic skills need to be regularly practiced with updated materials of various sectors. It is listed that not only listening and speaking skills are vital in interpreting learning but also reading and writing or researching skills are also essential in assisting students to become an interpreter.

As several interpreting scholars [1, 2, 15] demonstrate that besides knowledge, interpreting is a combination of translation skills and language skills, for instance, speaking, listening, and note-taking. Therefore, it can be seen that interpreting learning is a complex process and it requires more effort from learners [10, 14]. According to the study's results carried out by Li [3], it is indicated that language competence is the most critical prerequisite of novice interpreters recruiting requirements while translation skills and experience are the other two additional qualifications.

Landa and Tomoziu [6, 16] state that apart from the ability to understand the original speech, students of interpreting must understand the situational context so that messages could be delivered correctly to the audience. Hence, it is supported that interpreting is the process of "comprehending an incoming message" [14, p.58].

**Interpreting skills**

In addition to language competency, several research scholars [15, 17] argue that interpreting skills serve as the second vital quality, which might result in a good or embarrassing interpretation. Amongst the four categorized frameworks proposed by Arumí Ribas [17], all four strategies are about interpreting skills, including the ability to listen and understand the source speech, note-taking, decoding notes, and expression and reformulation. From this view, it can be explained that interpreting skills and techniques are significantly important to produce a proper translation in time. This point is in line with the

guidelines introduced by MIIS as cited in [2], in addition to professional knowledge to work in the field, interpreters are supposed to have a sharp analytical ability during the interpreting process.

**Ethics**

Despite certain types of jobs, there is a set of ethics rules to ensure that professionals follow social and moral standards. For this reason, interpreters' works are expected to be taken more seriously and professionally. Misinterpretation might cause severe consequences; and it, therefore, could affect the reputation among parties or nations [2]. Furthermore, in the field of translation and interpreting, there are challenges relating to sensitive domains [18], for example, law or social work. As a consequence, interpreters must pay attention to ethical professional relationships with the partners they are working with. However, Chesterman and Wagner [10] argue that interpreters are likely to face challenges when they experience real-life work and it is also stressed that there is a big difference between learning ethics theories and their application in practice.

*B. Current context of teaching interpretation courses in Tra Vinh University*

Tra Vinh University has earned its reputation on training various programs to meet the needs of the social labor market, and amongst those, English Language Studies performs a vital position; It is, therefore, currently attracting many students to enroll. The program offers various aspects of the English language, skills, and fields, which students might have interest in and apply for a job after graduation. One of these potentials is the translation and interpretation area. Students work with three levels of translation and interpretation skills respectively, ranging from lower levels to higher levels (level 1 is the lowest and level 3 is the highest, according to the current curriculum).

It is expected that students have to achieve the minimum level of language proficiency so that they can take translation and interpretation modules. For this reason, all of the students can only take these modules after the first year of their program. Additionally, a specialized translation module is one of the three optional choices for those students, who are not carrying out a minus

thesis. This module is normally taken in the final year of the bachelor's program.

English major students will start Interpretation 1 in the first semester of their second year. At this stage, students are supposed to complete four language skills at level 2 and Translation level 1, which can be explained that students have mastered language skills and have been familiar with basic interpreting skills in general. Each level of the interpretation modules has two credits (including theory introduction and practice) and is instructed within eleven weeks.

*C. Challenges of teaching interpreting to English major students in Tra Vinh University*

Since there is no separate program for students of interpreting in TVU, translation, and interpretation courses are partly integrated into the English major curriculum. As a result, English major students have fewer opportunities to fully practice interpretation skills. After teaching Interpretation level 1 with second-year English major students at three different classes, the author of this present paper faces certain challenges and problems, which will be presented as follows:

**A lack of updated textbooks and supporting resources**

This is the first and foremost challenge in teaching interpreting in the current context. Although there is a provided course syllabus with suggested textbooks for teachers, these remain limited. Moreover, several existing interpreting textbooks for Vietnamese EFL students are no longer appropriate for the development of society and most of the exercises in these textbooks mainly focus on explaining vocabularies, but little discussion about interpreting techniques. As a result, teachers, who are in charge of these classes, have to adapt additional teaching materials for students. Additionally, these are often designed based on teachers' own experiences. This might lead to inadequate learning outcomes with other teachers' groups.

**Correction imbalance between interpretation teaching and language teaching**

The next major challenge related to language knowledge that emerged in these classes is students' language competency. Although students

have completed the first year of college, many of them are still struggling with language skills, especially listening and reading skills. Therefore, the teacher had spent much more time correcting linguistic errors. Consequently, there was less time for teachers to concentrate on instructing or correcting interpreting skills, for example, note-taking skills and strategies needed for short-term and long-term memory improvement. These are considered essential for interpreters as well.

**A lack of specialized knowledge and soft skills**

Another considerable challenge is that students lack practical and social knowledge, which is considered fundamental in interpreting. Students tend to work better on familiar topics, for instance, education and tourism. When asked to interpret other subjects such as climate change, food security, etc., most students could not fully transfer and express a message to the target language . Additionally, the process of interpreting was mainly carried out in the classroom setting, potential problems, which might arise during interpretation were less focused. Therefore, students might find it more challenging when they come to work in real life. From these challenges, a competency-based approach has been adopted as the primary means of instruction for Interpretation 2 classes. The implementation of this approach will be introduced in the following section.

## III. THE USE OF COMPETENCY-BASED LEARNING TO IMPROVE INTERPRETING QUALITY

### A. *Competencies and a competency-based approach in teaching and learning*

Researchers [19–21] give different definitions with various aspects and perspectives towards competency. Defined by the OECD , competency is "the ability to respond effectively to complex requirements in a particular context." [22, p.12]. With this definition, it can be generally understood that competency might produce 'effectiveness'. Meanwhile, Marcellio [23] demonstrates that competence is a combination of skills and abilities, which are available and can be learned as well as student's readiness to address issues

in a specific context. The researcher emphasizes the potential abilities of an individual in the development process of his or her competency.

In Vietnam, the government has fostered teaching and learning quality by introducing innovative strategies into curricular reforms and encouraging teachers to exploit the advancement of technology into teaching practices [12]. In response to the urgent needs and current climate of Vietnam, the competency-based approach has been broadly introduced as an alternative for other traditional approaches such as content-based and teacher-centered based approaches from lower secondary schools and high school to higher education systems [13, 24, 25].

In 2014, the Ministry of Education and Training designed a handbook of innovative teaching materials for testing and assessment towards students' competency. In this handbook, competency is described as a flexible and organizational combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes, emotions, values, and personal motivation to effectively achieve complex goals in a given context [1, 12].

It can be seen that competency is built and reinforced through the integration of an individual's skills, actions, and other personal characteristics into the learning process to accomplish specific tasks in practical situations. Therefore, teaching based on learners' competency is highly expected to bring certain positive outcomes.

### B. *Implementation methodology of the competency-based approach into Interpretation classes of English major students in Tra Vinh University*

**Participants and process of implementing competency-based approach into Interpretation classes**

Realizing the importance of a competency-based approach in language acquisition and interpreting training, the author of this paper had implemented this approach into three Interpretation 2 classes with 65 students pursuing an English major at Tra Vinh University. The module consists of two credits with a total of 11 class meetings.

For the first week, students had chances to get to know more about interpreting theory

and discuss the strategies and techniques needed for interpreting, for example, note-taking, and short-term memory practice. After that, students had five main topics to practice each week, which were education, environment, social media, tourism, and healthcare. For each topic, students worked on common trends or current requirements of the job market. Students were provided topics in the first meeting of the course so that they could prepare well. Furthermore, during the course, students could design the materials themselves, students were asked to search for information and videos on the topics and posted links on the E-learning system. Moreover, students were encouraged to choose materials based on their English levels and ability. This aims to provide students with more chances to practice before class.

**Effective outcomes of competency-based learning**

After employing the indicated approach, there are several key noticeable outcomes. The first and foremost significant outcome is that students were able to produce a better and more fluent interpretation at an appropriate time. The reasons pointed out by students are that they could practice from the basic to advanced recordings. This allowed them to get familiar with the topic and words and therefore, they were more confident to interpret recordings at higher levels.

The next remarkable achievement is that students were likely to use more appropriate vocabularies for each presented topic. Their vocabulary use of both target and the source language is greatly proper in certain interpreting contexts. Students explained that as they worked with current issues in society, they could keep up with new and more familiar things and expose words correctly. For example, when practicing with an 'environment' topic, students interpreted faster with the related subtopics such as global warming or solar energy.

The last significant outcome is that students confidently and actively participated in performing interpreting activities. Students showed their willingness and excitement in the classroom as they can prepare in advance with given topics. Although individuals performed the task with different styles and word choices, they all tried

to perform their best and completed their interpreting task successfully. They said that as the tasks were designed at their levels and ability, they had a sense of accomplishment. This results in creating motivation for them to practice more.

## IV. SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

Although there are some positive results, to adopt the competency-based approach effectively, collaborations from different parties are necessary.

**Material and textbooks**

Firstly, it is expected that department leaders and teachers of instructions need to work together to design course materials and textbooks for each level of Interpreting modules of the program. Moreover, these materials should be up-to-date so that students are able to keep up with current trends.

**Assessment criteria**

Secondly, concerning the assessment for the module, it is advised that a detailed description of criteria needs to be addressed to students at the beginning of the course so that they can make the most of their preparation for the class. Moreover, the criteria should be endorsed by the authority so that it could be standardized and there would be less differential grading across teachers.

**Seminars and guest speakers**

Next, it is necessary to have seminars and conferences for teachers of interpreting so that they have opportunities to exchange ideas and update on new skills, methods, issues, and trends in the field. Last of all, one of the essentials is that it is practical to have guest speakers for interpreting classes. This can be useful for students to step out of the 'classroom box' and get into real-life interpreting situations. This enables students to get practical advice from experienced interpreters.

In conclusion, competencies are developed based on a self-paced process for learners to effectively perform specific activities. This enables them to achieve tasks in the community later in life. As Rylatt and Lohan, as cited in [23, p.2] said that when "we enter a new millennium, that the business of improving learning competencies and skills will remain one of the world's fastest-growing industries and priorities." In a word,

it could be claimed that instructing interpreting courses using a competency-based approach is plausible; and it is, as a result, worth adopting in language classrooms in general and in interpreting classes in particular.

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