

CONSTRUCTIVISM AND COOPERATIVE LEARNING: AN APPLICATION IN TEACHING INTERPRETING TO SENIOR STUDENTS OF BUSINESS ENGLISH AT THE UNIVERSITY OF FINANCE–MARKETING

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Abstract: The paper discusses the application of constructivism to teaching interpreting to senior students of Business English at the University of Finance-Marketing's Foreign Language Department. In fact, the author depicts the classroom model, in which the constructivist approach in combination with cooperative learning is adopted in two empirical courses. The participant observation and questionnaire reveal that the students are really interested in and inspired by the constructivist approach to teaching interpreting at tertiary level, and the factor analysis of material preference, language proficiency, confidence, methods and the teacher through data statistics indicates that the students like and support the empirical courses, and the teacher is the most influential on students' learning and the most satisfying factor.

Key words: Constructivism, cooperative learning, cognitive development, language proficiency

1. Introduction

Translation is “rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended the text” (Newmark, 1988, p. 5), and there would be no global communication without it (Newmark, 2003, cited in Nguyen Thi Nhu Ngoc, Nguyen Thi Kieu Thu & Le Thi Ngoc Anh, 2016). Since Vietnam's open-door policy, there has been a mounting demand for translating and interpreting due largely to its increasing economic, diplomatic and commercial relations with other countries. Then, translating and interpreting, which play a part in foreign language teaching and learning, especially at universities, colleges, academies and institutes (higher education institutions or HEIs), where students study to earn a degree in linguistics or applied linguistics, become more and more popular on the employment market and have been pursued by many as their life-long careers after graduation. Currently, about sixty HEIs are training translating and interpreting, either as a discipline or as a major, and the importance and popularity of this profession actually led to the official establishment of Vietnam Translator and Interpreter Group in 2015, in a hope to improve expertise and business in the field, and help increase training, teaching, assessing and accrediting trainees in the future (Nguyen Thi Nhu Ngoc et al., 2016).

Interpreting is “to translate one language into another as you hear it”, (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary) or “oral translation” (Nguyen Thi Kieu Thu, 2016). This skill has long been taught in Vietnam either in combination with or in separation from translating; nonetheless, it has gained much attention for two decades now at HEIs which teach foreign languages with the foundation of faculty departments of translating and interpreting (Nguyen Thi Kieu Thu, 2016). Although there have been numerous forums, workshops, and conferences, either online or offline on interpreting, researchers and lecturers still find it hard to spot the best approaches and methodologies on teaching, training, and assessing interpreting in Vietnam.

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At the University of Finance-Marketing (UFM), Foreign Language Department (FLD) started training Business English majored students in 1998. Based on the curriculum of Business English for undergraduates at the UFM's FLD, interpreting is offered separately from translating and is instructed in two consecutive courses, namely Interpreting 1 and Interpreting 2. Though formally constructed, the syllabi are still problematic as they fail to depict the methodology, the teaching perspectives and the relevant theories that guide the practices. Rather, they just focus themselves much on interpreting skill training and mention some topics under which the materials are adopted for practice in class; thus, the materials are varied and current. In fact, without the official course books concerned with the relevant theories, these courses often go more practical than academic. This is quite challenging for lecturers because each may implement the syllabi in a different way.

The practice also reveals that teaching interpreting as well as translating at the UFM's FLD is product-driven. Trainee students are very often given a source text and some time to prepare their performance individually or collaboratively. They, indeed, work individually for most of the time in the classroom; little discussion, little cooperation, and little criticism have been observed. The trainee students' performance is 'everything' that shows their competence, for the assessment of their work is based mainly on their presented product in class. This means failing to keep track of students' thought and to give them instant feedback or comments to improve their skills.

On the whole, the author of this paper decided on a change in the classroom of Interpreting 2, where trainee students can have much more autonomy to their studying via applying the constructivist approach and cooperative learning to better their interpreting competence. The paper's findings are, then, guided by three following research questions:

1. Does constructivism actually help out in students' interpreting learning?
2. How satisfied are students with constructivism in terms of perception, attitude, and behavior?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of applying constructivism to teaching interpreting?

2. Literature review

2.1. Constructivism and cooperative learning

Constructivism is a philosophical viewpoint about the nature of knowing, and it has recently grabbed great attention from educators because of its applicability and practicality in various sciences.

Before constructivist ideas, children's play and exploration of the world were normally seen as aimless and of little importance; however, Piaget (1973, cited in Can, 2009) did not agree with these traditional views but treat play as an important and necessary part of the student's cognitive development and provided scientific evidence for it. He developed *personal constructivism* focusing on cognitive and developmental perspectives. In his view, knowledge is external to the child and is acquired as he develops and interacts with the world via his actions. In other words, knowledge is a process of continuous self-construction through their experiences with the surroundings.

Bruner also defined discovery as getting knowledge for oneself by the use of his mind, and this involves an expectation of finding regularities and relationships in the environment (cited in Can, 2009). To obtain knowledge, children devise certain strategies for searching and finding out the regularities and relationships, and these acts mean constructing the ways to learn new things.

In a different way, Vygotsky (1978) believed that development is the conversion of social relations into mental functions and developed *social constructivism*. Knowledge could not be understood without reference to the social and cultural context where these concepts are embedded. In his view, learning is a process in which learners modify the situations when responding to it and the interactions between individuals in the development lead to acquiring new knowledge. In other words, knowing is a socio-cultural construction and meaning negotiation achieved through language and the language is the tool for making sense of the world.

Dewey (1966) supported the idea that knowing is the process of intervention and is always involved in actions. This means “learning by doing” as knowing is considered as consisting of operations that turn the experienced reality into a form of relationships that can be used later. Social interactions, then, drive participants to pay attention to what others construct and that leads to knowing the world.

Kuhn (1970) demonstrated how humans experience the world to get their knowledge constructed. In his viewpoint, people actively construct their understanding through constantly restructuring their thoughts, and perceive the world through their experiences, through interface of their senses and through their self-constructed meaning of those senses. In short, knowing is a process of dynamic adaptation towards viable interpretations of their experiences.

Cooperative learning refers to “students working in teams on an assignment or project under conditions in which certain criteria are satisfied, including that the team members be held individually accountable for the complete content of the assignment or project” (Felder & Brent, 2007). In fact, it can be used for any type of assignment that can be given to students in lecture classes, laboratories, or project-based courses. In addition, cooperative learning is an approach to group work that minimizes the occurrence of those unpleasant situations and maximizes the learning and satisfaction that result from working on a high-performance team (Law, 2009; Felder & Brent, 2007).

In short, the constructivist theory regards that knowledge is a “web of relationships” and is constructed actively by learners as they attempt to make sense of their experiences and environments (Can, 2009); hence, they should really have an opportunity to go through the student-driven approach in actively learning environments which feature problem-based learning, group learning, accelerated learning, discovery learning, inquiry-based learning, experiential learning, or project-based learning (Alzahrani & Woollard, 2013). In other words, learners should be in a studying environment where they are proactive and curious about the unknown to acquire knowledge. Concerning interpreting, it is believed that constructivism should work in combination with cooperative learning to create a favorable atmosphere for trainee interpreters to improve their competence in an active way.

2.2. Teaching and assessing interpreting

The Euro Commission suggests several types of interpreting such as *consecutive*, *simultaneous*, *relay*, *retour*, *pivot*, *cheval*, *asymmetric*, *whispering*, and *sign language*. In Vietnam, interpreting is more concerned with conference interpreting, and Nguyen Quoc Hung (2012), in his course book named *Interpreting Techniques: Vietnamese-English and English-Vietnamese*, introduces and discusses the two first types, namely consecutive and simultaneous interpreting. In addition, the approaches and methodologies to teaching interpreting quite vary from place to place. For some HEIs which define interpreting as a major, it is then taught as an end. The graduates from these HEIs are supposed to pursue their careers as professional interpreters later. In a different way, some HEIs offer interpreting as a means, and their students are expected to study interpreting to facilitate studying a foreign language, (Nguyen Thi Kieu Thu, 2016). Some other HEIs which follow the ASEAN University Network quality assurance treat interpreting teaching as an outcome-based process. Trainee

interpreters are expected to successfully complete the course when the outcome-specific criteria stated clearly on the syllabi are satisfied (Nguyen Quang Nhat, 2016).

The National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters based in Australia sets and maintains high national standards in translating and interpreting to enable the existence of a pool of accredited translators and interpreters responsive to the changing needs and demography of the Australian community. This organization has classified interpreters as five distinct levels: *language aide*, *para-professional interpreter*, *interpreter*, *conference interpreter* and *senior conference interpreter*, (Nguyen Quoc Hung, 2012) and those who wish to make a living in this profession should be accredited. However, in Vietnam, the process and procedure of training, teaching, assessing and accrediting interpreting are not standardized yet and are still in much difficulty. Even though there are a few course books on interpreting published by Vietnamese authors and academics, interpreting is on its challenging path because the theories and studies in the field are still few.

Regarding its assessment, each HEI sets a different standard for students to be passed, (Nguyen Thi Nhu Ngoc et al., 2016) and assessment works more for pedagogical intent than for accreditation (Nguyen Thi Kieu Thu, 2016). Assessing interpreting and translating is based on students' in-class performance (as a product) rather than improving competence (as a process) as most criteria take into account of what students interpret or translate achieved through their performance, (Nguyen Thi Nhu Ngoc et al., 2016). For instance, Table 1 shows a comparison of assessment criteria of translating and interpreting Vietnamese to English and vice versa at two HEIs. The criteria shown below are concerned with language use of a target text as a particular product, either in the oral or spoken forms; however, the assessment fails to reflect students' thought, attitude, effect, and the like.

Table 1. A comparison of criteria for assessing translating and interpreting
(Nguyen Thi Nhu Ngoc et al., 2016)

HEIs	Criterion 1	Criterion 2	Criterion 3	Criterion 4
Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities	Accuracy 50%	Language use: 25%	Translation competence: 25%	
Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam	Comprehension 40%	Accuracy and appropriate rendering: 30%	Coherence, cohesion and reorganization: 20%	Grammar, spelling and punctuation: 10%

In short, different approaches to interpreting in Vietnam with much focus on analyzing trainees' target texts show the lack of standards for training, teaching, assessing and accrediting trainees and present challenges to make interpreting a well-trained and well-assessed profession in Vietnam.

3. Application of constructivism in teaching interpreting

In Vietnam, there are far more studies on translating than on interpreting. Not until recently has interpreting been discussed more at workshops and conferences; nonetheless, few papers center themselves on the teaching methodology which guides the approach, the design and the method of teaching this course. As a result, a constructivist approach to teaching interpreting is quite promising.

3.1. Classroom models and sampling

Interpreting 2 is scheduled to take place in forty five fifty-minute periods in eleven class meetings, each of which lasts four periods in a week. All the trainee interpreters were instructed to take part in the learning procedure where they were about to have a lot of autonomy to determine what they want to study later.

At the very beginning of the course, the author, also known as the lecturer of Interpreting 2 in the empirical courses, described the classroom model of Interpreting 2 to the senior students of Business English. More specifically, they were about to follow the 3P model (Presentation-Practice-Production), where constructivist and cooperative learning are combined to improve trainee students' interpreting competence. For every class meeting, they are allowed to explore the theory on interpreting and the strategy and techniques accompanied by illustrations and examples before they move on to the practice.

For the whole course, they are permitted to choose the materials they want to interpret based on the given criteria. They negotiate their choice of the materials as the source texts, either Vietnamese to English or vice versa ahead of or in class prior to their drill. Then, they normally sit in groups of six to eight members to simulate a real-life situation where interpreting is needed. They cooperate, make discussions and suggestions and agree on assignments before playing the roles. The lecturer walks around the classroom to provide help and manages the practice to make sure students can improve their competence and performance.

For production, students play what they have rehearsed or drilled. They might simulate a conference, a forum, an on-site exhibition, a ceremony, a celebration, an announcement, and the like. To ensure authenticity, one student produces the source text, another works as the interpreter, and the others in the group play the audience. The rest of the class also plays the audience to listen to, check and raise questions to help the on-going trainee interpreter improve his/her interpreting competence. The lecturer times and manages the activity to maintain the continuity of the production in class.

On the whole, the approach to teaching interpreting is constructivist because students work in groups for most of the time, and they can have autonomous access to what they do and how they do it in class. They, sure enough, have strategy to what they want to know, and the knowing takes place through interactions among the peers.

3.2. Sampling and instruments

The author has been conducting the empirical work on 89 senior students of Business English on two Interpreting 2 courses for six weeks now. Because of the small size, all of those studying Interpreting 2 have been sampled for the research purposes.

Qualitatively, observation of the sample is the most regular activities in class. As the lecturer of the courses, he kept record of students' genres of source texts for practice, and made observation of their performance in class in terms of interest, attitude, cooperation and language competence.

Quantitatively, the questionnaire consisting of twenty four study questions is employed to analyze five affecting factors: namely materials, language proficiency, confidence, methods and the teacher. These factors are supposed to influence students' learning when the constructivist approach is applied to teach interpreting. The questionnaire designed on the Google form was sent electronically to the sample's Facebook to be filled out. However, the data of 85 informants (equivalent to 96%) was recorded by the deadline. As can be shown in Table 3, all of them have successfully passed Interpreting 1 before registering for Interpreting 2 and it is also interesting to note that more than half of them got the score of seven or higher.

The student subjects' responses to the study questions in the questionnaire are based on the Likert scale based rating which ranges from 1 to 5. This five point scale includes 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neutral), 4 (agree) and 5 (completely agree). The interpretation of the data primarily relies on the mean

range of strong disagreement (below 1.8), disagreement (1.81-2.6), neutrality (2.61-3.4), agreement (3.41-4.2) and complete agreement (4.21 or higher).

Overall, all that they reveal during the empirical work and through the survey questionnaire will be analyzed and reported in detail in Section 3 of this paper.

4. Data analysis and discussion

4.1. Trainee students' attitude and interest

Figure 1 provides the information on the students' choice of materials, categorized under certain topics. For the past 6 weeks, 54 source texts have been submitted for the practice. All of them are in English, and most of them are very current. As is seen in Figure 1, business news including economics, tourism, trade, and catering account for the majority of the chart, totaling 66%. Next come political news with 15% and education and health make up 9% each. Last are literature and agriculture which represent 6% and 4% respectively. Although the materials are for the trainee interpreters to pick up, their preference of genres reflects their major in Business English as they are interested in business news. This trend really coincides with their preference of the previous internship choice among 294 senior students of Business English from 2015 to 2017 as shown in Figure 2, which shows the dominance of 92% representing the intern's choice of management, marketing, tourism and foreign trade as their prospective careers.

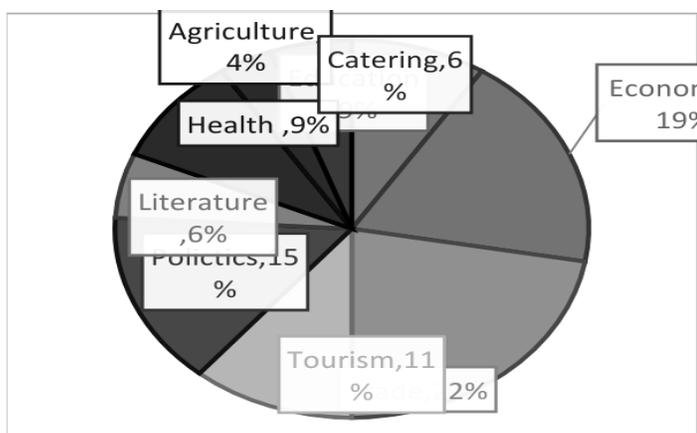


Figure 1. Students' choice of materials

Trainee students are really interested in the performance in the production stage, where they are keen on listening and proactive in raising questions for the trainee interpreters to show their interpreting competence. During the practice stage, cooperative learning keeps them busy with discussion, suggestions and negotiation. This makes the class atmosphere a lot more exciting and inspiring.

Concerning the trainee interpreters' confidence, they show less uncertainty in word choice and better use of voice and intonation as they have much time to cooperatively work on the source texts they have chosen by themselves. Thanks to that, the level of proficiency has been improved through the time.

In short, interpreting is often considered as hard, and students were normally not fond of this course. The truth is that very few students chose their internship in this field (see Figure 2); therefore, the empirical work has been rewarding for him.

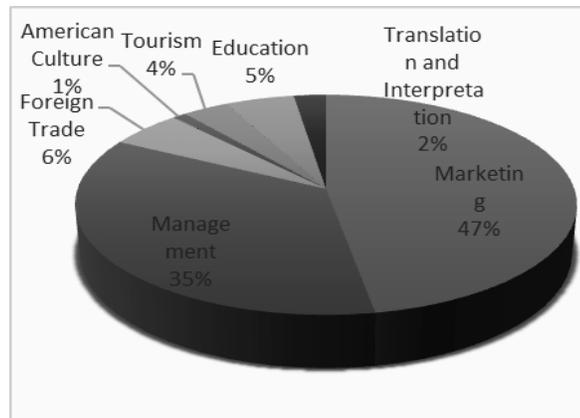


Figure 2. Students' internship fields in 2015 to 2017

4.2. Trainee students' perception

Table 2 shows the trainee students' perception and expectation of the new approach to teaching interpreting at the UFM's FLD. The information is categorized into five groups, namely material choice, language proficiency, confidence, methods and the teacher; and these factors are highly believed to affect the student subjects' satisfaction and expectation in class. Generally speaking, they are satisfied with all the previously mentioned factors because the mean ranges of almost all responses reach 3.41 or higher. Furthermore, since the standard deviation and the variance are less than or equal to ± 1 , the data quite condenses toward their means, indicating that the respondents filled out the questionnaire consciously. In a nutshell, these figures are the initial signs to prove that the empirical work is quite successful.

Table 2. Statistical figures on students' perception of the empirical work

Item	Mean	Std. Dev.	Variance	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Stat.	Stat.	Stat.	Stat.	Std. Err.	Stat.	Std. Err.
M1. You have the autonomy to choose the source text.	3.56	.906	.820	-.788	.261	.844	.517
M2. You can discuss and suggest the type of source texts with your mates.	3.85	.838	.703	-.572	.261	-.007	.517
M3. You have good access to various source texts.	3.60	.862	.743	-.260	.261	-.514	.517
M4. Your group's source texts are important for you and your future job.	3.51	.766	.586	.143	.261	-.314	.517
M5. You like your group's source text for interpretation.	3.66	.733	.537	-.107	.261	-.200	.517
L1. You have an opportunity to maintain conversational English.	3.73	.662	.438	-.146	.261	.001	.517
L2. You have a chance to discuss the terminologies in English.	3.61	.638	.407	-.855	.261	.431	.517
L3. You are often critical of your peers' translation.	3.33	.878	.771	-.379	.261	-.045	.517
L4. Cooperation helps you study interpreting better.	4.22	.643	.414	-.241	.261	-.640	.517
L5. Cooperation help improve fluency in interpreting.	4.05	.706	.498	-.275	.261	-.275	.517
C1. Group discussion helps broaden your knowledge.	4.25	.671	.450	-.335	.261	-.773	.517
C2. Group discussion makes you more confident in presentations later.	4.12	.747	.557	-.371	.261	-.557	.517
C3. Group discussion is helpful for interpreting.	4.13	.686	.471	-.171	.261	-.843	.517
C4. You like cooperative learning.	3.98	.690	.476	-.861	.261	3.08	.517

C5. You will adopt this type of learning to study at university.	3.92	.676	.457	.100	.261	-.772	.517
Me1. You have much guidance on studying interpreting.	3.66	.682	.466	-.368	.261	.160	.517
Me2. You are permitted to explore theories before practicing in class.	3.98	.756	.571	-.639	.261	.567	.517
Me3. You can apply what you have learnt to practicing interpreting skills.	3.75	.785	.617	-.738	.261	1.21	.517
Me4. You find the theories helpful for practicing interpreting.	3.79	.742	.550	-.534	.261	.370	.517
T1. Your present teacher of Interpreting 2 is knowledgeable in teaching interpreting.	4.15	.588	.345	-.397	.261	1.49	.517
T2. He is helpful and caring.	4.24	.570	.325	-.420	.261	1.81	.517
T3. He knows good ways to help you improve interpreting skills.	4.19	.627	.393	-.456	.261	.853	.517
G1. You find the current approach to teaching interpreting more effective than that in Interpreting 1.	4.31	.740	.548	-.742	.261	-.148	.517
G2. You like the current approach to interpreting.	4.18	.710	.504	-.473	.261	-.152	.517

More specifically, the items marked as M1 - M5 are concerned with the choice of materials for practice in class, and it is exciting to know that the means of these items are above the agreement level of 3.41. However, though students agree with all the statements, the statistics figure out that they are not completely satisfied with the source texts chosen by their peers. This is because they are grouped on the basis of convenience, not of interest; thus, each member follows a different interest and need, and they hardly agree to one and the same topic. In addition, because the Skewness and the Kurtosis are negative (except M4), the data spreads further to the left of the mean and the data distribution is quite flat accordingly.

The items marked as L1-L5 center on the student subjects' language proficiency in the practice and production stages. Except for the response to L3, which bears the mean below the agreement level (3.33), the remainder is with high levels of rating, showing that the student subjects are satisfied with their practice and believe that cooperation in learning can improve their language skills. Additionally, the Skewness (except L2) shows that the data spread to both sides of but close to the means. Overall, although the student subjects are not really critical of their peers' interpreting, the statistics point out that cooperation is helpful for their learning.

For the items marked as C1-C5 in Table 2, the means of the ratings are quite high, showing that the student subjects agree with all the claimed statements in the questionnaire. However, the Skewness shows that most of the data (except C5) spreads to the left side of the means. However, in C4, the Kurtosis peaks 3.08, showing that the data distribution is sharply high to the right of the means, while the rest fall quite flat. In short, the student subjects are satisfied with the cooperation to improve their confidence. This finding concurs with the less uncertainty of vocabulary choice and better use of voice and intonation mentioned in Section 3.1.

The items coded as Me1-Me4 focus on the methods of teaching in class. The responses of this factor well reach the level of agreement. While the Skewness indicates that the data spreads more to the left of the means, the Kurtosis shows that the condensed data reaches the considerable height to the right of the mean, especially for Me3 whose Kurtosis tops at 1.21. In fact, the standard deviation and the variance of Me3 are higher than those of the other items, revealing that the students are a little diverse in applying the theory into real life. This is true because the skills of memory, visualization and not-taking need improving through the time. They cannot be formed in one day; the students find it hard to master them.

The teacher is the last factor that needs analyzing; however, it is interesting to see that this factor is with the highest ratings, revealing that the students are satisfied with the teacher most. Because the means are quite high, the Skewness is negative and falls far to the left in all the items, and the Kurtosis indicates some sharp heights of the data distribution in T2 and T1 that hit 1.81 and 1.49, centering to the right of the means respectively. In general, the statistics show that the teacher is the most satisfying in the class room; thus, he is the most influential and inspiring factor of the five ones mentioned above.

The last two items marked G1 and G2 in Table 2 help the student subjects confirm the use of the constructivist approach to learning interpreting, and the responses are quite positive, especially G1, which affirms that the current approach is more effective than the previous one in Interpreting 1. This, moreover, reveals that the approach should be applied on a much larger basis. To understand more about this, the author decides on doing the cross table statistics provided in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Correlation between score and like of the constructivist approach

		You like the current approach to interpreting.				Total
		2	3	4	5	
Your score of Interpreting 1	5 to below 7	1	7	18	15	41
	7 to 8	0	5	23	13	41
	above 8	0	0	2	1	3
Total		1	12	43	29	85

Table 3 shows that only one of the student subjects disagrees with the approach, and twelve others hold their neutral stance; meanwhile, the rest (making up about 85%) support and like it. Also seen in Table 3, the higher score the supporters get, the more they like the approach, indicating that better students prefer it.

On the whole, the observation and the questionnaire help uncover some myth related to the newly applied approach to teaching interpreting, and the findings show that the empirical work is quite successful. The student subjects give the high ratings to show their complete agreement in the benefit of cooperation in learning interpreting (L4), group discussion in broadening knowledge (C1), the teacher's help and care (T2) and the effectiveness of the newly applied approach to interpreting (G1).

5. Conclusion

The students' experiences in and perception of the application of constructivism and cooperative learning in Interpreting 2 have been described, analyzed and reported in the paper. The results of the six-week-long empirical courses have proven some initial success, and students show much interest in studying interpreting. The observation shows that the students are keen on learning interpreting when experiencing the new approach. The factor analysis of material choice, language proficiency, confidence, methods and the teacher get high rankings, asserting that the student subjects are satisfied with the new approach. The data gathered in the questionnaire, in addition, reveals that they like the approach, and they want it to be applied more. Therefore, it is highly expected that teaching and learning interpreting at HEIs should be based on this approach.

Apart from the positive results mentioned above, there are some disadvantages that need addressing to get better success. Firstly, when grouped, the students should be advised to choose the peers on the basis of needs and interest. This will help them choose materials much more easily and appropriately. Secondly, although there are criteria for choosing the proper texts for practice, students still tend to pick the one which is less challenging or to simplify the text to make it much easier. Thirdly, each group often chooses one

text, and the members only focus on practicing it. Fourthly, the new approach should be combined with technology because everyone is now working with information technology tools; thus, teaching them to master IT tools should be a must at tertiary level. Finally, students should take better advantage of cooperative learning as after-school assignments because they have more time at home, and they can group to improve their skills much better.

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