

Evaluation of outcome-based learning in an undergraduate English language program

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ABSTRACT

Since 2008, Outcome-Based Learning (OBL), a student-centred strategy aiming to enhance the quality of teaching and learning, has been launched as a major initiative among higher education institutions in Hong Kong. When adopting OBL at course level, other than designing the OBL framework, it is also very important to evaluate the effectiveness of the OBL implementation. However, studies focusing on the evaluation of OBL have been rare. In this paper, we will report on the evaluation of the implementation of OBL in 17 pilot courses in the English Department in the Hong Kong Institute of Education. Five evaluation instruments were developed, and questionnaire surveys and interviews based on these instruments were carried out to find out both students' and teachers' perceptions of OBL adopted in the pilot courses. The findings suggest that both the students and the teachers hold a generally positive attitude towards OBL, but a number of issues have been raised concerning the successful implementation of OBL at course level. It is hoped that this study will shed light on how OBL can be evaluated effectively, and how it can be implemented successfully at course level.

Keywords: Outcome-Based Learning, undergraduate, English language programme, evaluation, Hong Kong

INTRODUCTION

In 2008, the University Grants Committee (UGC) of Hong Kong decided to promote the adaptation of outcome-based approaches among its funded institutions in response to the increasing interest in student learning outcomes and calls for educational accountability (Killen, 2000) in recent years. This was intended to help judge whether the processes and deployment of resources are effective in enabling students to achieve the intended student learning outcomes (University Grants Committee of Hong Kong, 2008). Clear understanding and articulation of intended learning outcomes facilitates the design of an effective curriculum and appropriate assessments to measure achievement, and the planning of learning activities associated directly with the specific outcomes (City University of Hong Kong, 2010). This is known as ‘constructive alignment’ (Biggs, 2004). Since then, the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd) has embarked on a journey to review its approaches to teaching and learning by implementing outcome-based learning (OBL) initiatives. Moreover, the development of OBL has become a key element in HKIEd’s development of a new undergraduate curriculum for 2009/12 (Kennedy, 2009). The main concern behind such development is what we want our students to know, be able to do and to value as the teachers of Hong Kong’s future generations.

The HKIEd started the planning of OBL development back in 2008, and the Department of English was one of the chosen departments for the first round of OBL piloting. After the successful development of the Programme Intended Learning Outcomes (PILOs) for the Bachelor of Education (English Language) (BEd(EL)) Programme in 2009, colleagues in the English Department started to convert the traditional courses into an OBL format, and OBL pilot studies were carried out in selected courses in the academic years 2009-10, 2010-11 and 2011-12. One essential aspect of the piloting is the evaluation of the effectiveness of the OBL implementation. As a result, a set of evaluation instruments were developed, and the adaption of OBL in the pilot courses was evaluated thoroughly using the instruments. In this article, the development of the set of OBL evaluation tools will be reported, and the research findings of the comprehensive OBL evaluation based on the data collected will be discussed. Finally, implications of the findings will be deliberated.

OUTCOME-BASED EDUCATION (OBE) AND EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

Spady, a leading disciple of OBE, points out that “outcome-based education means organizing for results: basing what we do instructionally on the outcomes we want to achieve” (Spady, 1988, p.5). According to McNeir (1993, p.1), OBE “specifies the outcomes the students should be able to demonstrate upon leaving the system. OBE focuses educational practice on ensuring that students master those outcomes and it asserts that all students can succeed.” For Harden (2002, p.117), OBE is characterized by: “the development of clearly defined and published learning outcomes that must be achieved before the end of a course; the design of the curriculum, learning strategies and learning opportunities to ensure the achievement of the learning outcomes; an assessment process matched to the learning outcomes and the assessment of individual students to ensure that they achieve the outcomes; and the provision of remediation and enrichment for students as appropriate.” In Spady’s words, OBE is not a specific programme or reproducible package, “but a way of designing, developing, delivering and documenting instruction in terms of its intended goals and outcomes (Spady, 1988, p.5).”

Outcome-based education philosophy recognizes the need to involve the entire education community in determining what students need to learn and then in doing whatever is necessary and reasonable to be certain that each student does learn (Rogers & Dana, 1995,

p. 7). From his own experience, Towers (1996) listed the following that are necessary to make OBE work: first, what the student is to learn must be clearly identified; second, the student's progress is based on demonstrated achievement; third, multiple instructional and assessment strategies need to be available to meet the needs of each student; and finally, adequate time and assistance need to be provided so that each student can reach the maximum potential. The implication is that outcome-based education leads to educational change which is supported by Tucker (2004) who points out that OBE is a process that involves the restructuring of curriculum, assessment and reporting practices in education to reflect the achievement of high order learning and mastery rather than the accumulation of course credits. Adam (2004, p.3) also agreed that "learning outcomes and 'outcomes-based approaches' have implications for curriculum design, teaching, learning and assessment, as well as quality assurance."

CONSTRUCTIVE ALIGNMENT

'Constructive alignment' is an approach to curriculum design that closely associates what the student is to learn with pre-specified learning outcomes. The 'constructive' aspect refers to the idea that students construct meaning through relevant learning activities. The 'alignment' aspect refers to what the teacher does, which is to set up a learning environment that supports the learning activities appropriate to achieving the desired learning outcomes (Biggs, 2004). McMahon & Thakore (2006, p.10) define 'constructive alignment' as having coherence between assessment, teaching strategies and intended learning outcomes in an educational programme. To Warren (2004, p.29), constructive alignment "encourages clarity in the design of the curriculum, and transparency in the links between what is learned and what is assessed." According to Acharya (2003), OBE addresses the following key questions: What do you want the students to learn? Why do you want them to learn it? How can you best help students learn it? How will you know what they have learnt?

The above shows that OBE is using outcomes to guide the instructional planning, as what matters ultimately is not what is taught but what is learnt. Therefore, the most desirable learning outcomes are first identified and the curriculum, instructional materials and assessments are created to support the intended outcomes (Spady 1988; 1993). It is important that what we teach and how we teach, and how we assess should lead to the intended outcomes in a logical and effective manner. In other words, the teaching and learning activities and the assessment tasks ought to be 'constructively aligned' with the intended outcomes, such that they are fully integrated and consistent with one another.

OUTCOME-BASED LEARNING (OBL) AT HKIED

The HKIED has structured OBL in such a way that learning outcomes have been developed at three different levels – the Institute level, the programme level, and the course level (HKIED OBL Unit, n.d.). First, a set of Generic Intended Learning Outcomes (GILOs) was developed at the Institute level. The GILOs represent the Institute's expectations for all graduates irrespective of the varied programmes they undertake and articulate various generic abilities encompassing knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions. These GILOs guide the development of Programme Intended Learning Outcomes (PILOs) for each degree programme, and the PILOs then further guide the development of Course Intended Learning Outcomes (CILOs).

The English Department of HKIED has conducted the OBL Pilot since the academic year 2009-2010 in response to the Institute's OBL Action Plan. After a small scale undertaking of OBL Pilot in 2009-2010, a larger scale of OBL Pilot was carried out in 2010-

2011 and 2011-2012, with sixteen colleagues piloting seventeen OBL courses. The successful implementation of outcome-based learning at HKIEd is based on the following four key premises: 1) defining the most important outcomes for students to achieve as a result of participating in an academic experience; 2) assessing how well students are actually achieving those outcomes; 3) using the results to improve the academic experience; and 4) continuously supporting students to achieve higher levels of performance (HKIEd OBL Unit, 2011, p.1). In this study, we will focus on the second and the third premises.

From a curriculum design perspective, we see the adaptation of OBL in curriculum design as a loop, as shown in Figure 1 (Appendix). First, we need to design the OBL framework for a course: appropriate course intended learning outcomes, relevant course topics, and appropriate assessment tasks, which are all aligned with each other; then we need to develop appropriate course materials and learning activities which aim to help students to achieve the intended learning outcomes; after the implementation, it is important to evaluate the effectiveness of OBL; the evaluation results will then be analysed, and the findings will help to inform the re-design of the course for future implementation.

The design and implementation of OBL at programme and course levels in the English Department at the HKIEd have been reported and discussed in two recent articles (Wang, 2011a; 2011b). In the current study, we will focus on the evaluation and analysis parts of the OBL loop: evaluating the effectiveness of OBL by collecting feedback from students and staff, and analysing the collected data and using the findings to inform the learning community how OBL can be implemented more effectively in the future.

METHODOLOGY

In the current study, sixteen colleagues from the English Department of the HKIEd piloted OBL in seventeen randomly selected courses, and around 600 students were involved in these courses.

Questionnaire surveys

In order to find out students' perception of the OBL approach, two instruments were designed by the English Department OBL project team (five academic staff, one external OBL consultant from Australia, and one research assistant), and were validated by the HKIEd OBL Unit (which provides leadership of OBL development in the HKIEd). First, a Mid-course OBL Evaluation Form was designed, aiming at finding out students' perceptions of OBL half way through the study of a course, as indicated in Table 1 (Appendix).

A more comprehensive End-of-course OBL Evaluation Form was also designed to find out students' perceptions of the OBL approach after they have completed a course, as indicated in Table 2 (Appendix).

Interviews

Focus group interviews with students

Having surveyed all the students involved in the OBL pilot courses, focus group interviews with students were carried out, so as to further clarify the findings from the questionnaire surveys. 33 Year 1 to Year 4 students of the BEd (EL) programme who participated in the OBL pilot were randomly selected for the interviews, and the duration of the interviews was around 30 to 45 minutes. The interview protocols are shown below.

- What OBL courses have you taken in this semester or in previous semester(s)?

- Have you ever heard of the terms ‘Outcome-Based Learning’ (OBL) and ‘Outcomes Based Education’ (OBE) before taking these OBL courses? How do you get such information?
- How do you know that the tutor has adopted OBL in teaching in the pilot course(s)?
- How will you describe your perception of OBL? How is OBL different from the traditional teaching approach?
- Do you believe OBL is helpful to your learning? Why? Take any OBL courses you have taken as an example:
- How do the Course Intended Learning Outcomes (CILOs) help you understand the focus of the course and the purpose of the assessment tasks?
- How do the teaching and learning activities support the CILOs? Give examples.
- What is your perception of the fit between assessment tasks and CILOs?
- Other suggestions

Interviews with teaching staff

Other than interviewing the students, individual interviews with 6 teaching staff were also carried out, each lasting for 20 to 30 minutes. The interview protocols are shown below.

- The English Department OBL project team has set guidelines for teachers to pilot OBL in their courses. Are the instructions clear? Any concerns?
- The team also guided the tutors to conduct the OBL evaluation surveys in the middle and at the end of the course. After receiving the completed evaluation forms, the team has compiled the data analysis reports and sent them to the tutors for reference. Do you find this kind of support helpful to your teaching? In what ways?
- Do you have any comments on the OBL Evaluation Forms and the Tutor’s Reflection Form?
- Do you think the Tutor’s Reflection Form can help to enhance the quality of teaching and learning? Why?
- When piloting the OBL course, have you ever encountered any problems that the OBL team can help resolve?
- Do you find OBL beneficial? In what ways do you benefit from this?
- What kinds of change have you made during the OBL piloting process?
- Other suggestions

Teachers’ reflection form

In order to give the teachers an opportunity to reflect on their adaptation of OBL in their courses in a formal way, so that the reflection can inform the future adjustment of teaching in their courses, an OBL Teachers’ Reflection Form was designed. Sixteen teachers who piloted OBL in their courses filled in the form after the completion of the course. The Form consists of five questions, as shown below.

- From the Mid-course and End-of-course evaluation analysis, what can you tell about your students’ response to the clarity of the CILOs (Course Intended Learning Outcomes)?
- Do you think the learning experience you provided to your students can help them achieve the CILOs? Give example(s).
- Did you encounter any difficulties when piloting OBL in this course? What are they?
- Did the assessment tasks measure the CILOs effectively? Please elaborate.

- Are there any aspects of your OBL pilot course outline which you think need to be revised for future use after your reflection? Please give detail.

DATA ANALYSIS RESULTS

During the OBL pilot study, evaluation data were collected from the following sources: Mid-course OBL Evaluation (Students); End-of-course OBL Evaluation (Students); Focus Group Interviews on OBL with Students; Interviews on OBL with Individual Teachers; and Tutors' personal reflections after the completion of the OBL pilot courses.

Mid-course OBL Evaluation

Students were required to fill in the 5-point likert scale Mid-course OBL Evaluation Form half way through an OBL pilot course. After collecting the completed forms, the OBL project team Research Assistant conducted the data analysis within one week, and compiled a report for the teachers, so that they could give timely feedback to students, and make adjustment to their teaching if necessary in the second half of the course. In this survey, 512 completed evaluation forms were collected. Figure 2 (Appendix) shows the average mean scores of the five items in the Mid-Course OBL evaluation form.

As shown in Figure 2, Q3 scored the highest average mean of 4.078, which indicates that most students found the assessment tasks were well aligned with the intended learning outcomes. As for Q5, it scored the lowest average mean of 3.496, suggesting that half way through the course, not all the students had enough confidence in achieving the course intended learning outcomes by the end of the course. On the whole, the average mean scores of the five items are all above 3.5 and two of them are above 4, which implies that the students' feedback on the OBL approach half way through the course were largely positive.

End-of-course OBL Evaluation

At the end of an OBL pilot course, students were required to fill in the 5-point likert scale End-of-course OBL Evaluation Form. Altogether 508 copies of completed evaluation forms were collected in this survey. Data analysis was carried out, and a report was compiled for each course, which helps to inform the relevant teacher to further improve their course design.

Through a factor analysis, five factors were identified based on the survey data of the End-of-course OBL Evaluation: 1) Course Intended Learning Outcomes (CILOs) (Q1 & Q2); 2) Planning, design and alignment of the course (Q3 – Q5); 3) Learning and teaching activities of the course (Q6 – Q8); 4) Course assessment (Q9); 5) Feasibility (Q10 – Q13) (See Table 2 (Appendix) for the actual questionnaire items). Figure 3 (Appendix) shows the average mean scores of the five factors.

As shown in Figure 3, the average mean scores of the five factors are all above 3.8, showing that students' feedback on OBL after the completion of the course was generally positive. Among all the five factors, the second factor "Planning, design and alignment of the course" received the highest average mean score of 4.001.

OBL Focus Group Interviews with Students

Focus Group Interviews on OBL with 6 groups of students (33 students in total) were carried out, and the findings are reported below.

Fifteen students could tell the differences between the traditional teaching approach and OBL in the interviews. First, they agreed that OBL is student-centred. For example, one Year 2 student said, “I think how the teacher teaches depends on what learning outcomes he/she expects the students to achieve, or what learning outcomes the teacher predicts. So it’s more student oriented. Teachers are more concerned about the students’ need... So it’s different from the traditional teaching approach in which the teacher follows the textbook or a fixed syllabus and they just teach what they want to teach.”

Second, it seems that the traditional role of students has changed in OBL as they have become active rather than passive learners, as one Year 3 student pointed out, “In the traditional teaching approach we are quite passive, we accept what teachers feed us. But for OBL, the learner has his own autonomy and has become a knowledge constructor.” Apart from being active learners, one Year 2 student added, “As a learner, we turn out to be more responsible for our own learning. It’s because we know the focus, the learning outcomes, we know what we’re doing and then just go for it. We have clearer direction and better attitude when we are having our lessons, so we’re more active...” His peer added, “We have micro-teaching in the course ‘Secondary ELT Methods I: Developing Oracy Skills’. Before micro-teaching, the teacher shows us what he expects us to do in micro-teaching, for example, to demonstrate certain skills in it. Therefore, we have to know what the CILOs are before doing the micro-teaching. This means we have to follow the CILOs listed in the course outline and prepare for our micro-teaching. After micro-teaching, we have to do reflective writing which is one of the assignments. Again, we have to refer to CILO3, ‘to demonstrate critical, reflective ability.....in the teaching of listening and speaking.’ Based on this outcome, we think of what we have to demonstrate in the essay. So we’re more responsible for our learning.”

Third, students defined teachers as facilitators in OBL, which can be reflected by the opinion of one Year 4 student, “Teachers are like facilitators who help students achieve the learning outcomes. If the students’ learning is out of track, he/she has to do something to help the students to get back to the right direction.” Another Year 1 student further commented, “In the traditional approach, teachers give you lectures and then some exercises to do and guide you how to do the exercises and they are more like a giver, they just give some materials to you and you absorb them. In OBL, apart from giving the materials directly to you, they also recommend other resources and guide you to read those resources. They are more like a facilitator...”

Fourth, students claimed that there were more students’ involvement and student-teacher and even student-student interactions in OBL. One Year 4 student gave an example, “We have peer assessment. In each lesson, two of us will do presentation together and then the others will give us feedback and discuss some of the key points in our presentation. And compared with the traditional teaching approach, I think it’s more student-centred and we participate more and discuss more in class.” Another Year 4 student added, “... Because you have more time to express what you think in these student-centred activities and the teachers will interact with you immediately. They will sometimes comment on our performance immediately. So interaction is quite active in the OBL approach.”

Students used interesting analogies to compare OBL with other things, such as a guideline, a checklist, a road map, a finishing line in a running race, and a recipe. As perceived by a year-3 student, OBL is like a finishing line in a running race because the athletes (students) have to aim at the finishing line in a race, meaning they have to achieve the learning outcomes in a course. Another Year 1 student said, “OBL is like a road map. The CILOs show us what kind of knowledge we need to learn in the course. So we need to find those important concepts or theories in books.” One Year 4 student even perceived OBL as a recipe: “It’s like a recipe because it tells you all the ingredients of a dish and the ways of

cooking it. And you have the expectation of the food and its taste and these are like the learning outcomes the teachers' expect us to achieve."

A Year 3 student pointed out that teachers put more emphasis on the learning outcomes / learning process when they were planning and designing the courses: "I think outcome based approach put more emphasis on outcomes, so when teachers plan their lessons, they'll set up the outcomes first, some specific outcomes for the students to achieve and then they plan backward to see how to conduct the lesson."

Another Year 3 student also thought that OBL was a reflective process for teachers as some teachers would adjust their teaching after the OBL Mid-course Evaluation: "I think some lecturers really have the experience in doing things. After the OBL Mid-course Evaluation, they read the comments and show their adjustment in the courses." Another Year 4 student added, "I think OBL is a way for teachers to reflect on their teaching. In a way that they need to monitor or evaluate how far the students have achieved the learning outcomes. By doing so, teachers know how to help students to make progress in learning."

The students were in general positive towards the OBL approach, agreeing that the approach enabled them to have clearer directions for learning, doing assignments and doing revisions, as they had a clearer understanding of the teachers' expectations and what they need to do in order to meet expectations. For example, one student pointed out, "I'll refer to the CILOs in the course outline before I do my assignment, I'll have a look at the (assessment) criteria. I think that's helpful because it lets me know about the teacher's expectation."

To students, learning diversity, students' learning attitude, class size, duration of the course, the teachers' teaching strategies and the extent of teachers' belief in OBL might affect the effectiveness of the OBL approach. It seems that the last factor is more emphasized by the students. For instance, one Year 2 student commented, "I think the OBL approach is a kind of tool. For example, it's like a gun. If it's in the hands of the policemen, it can help to fight crime; but if it's in the hands of normal people, it won't have much effect. So I think it really depends on how the teachers instruct the course, because we're not in control of that." A peer supported such an argument and said, "Teaching and learning is still the interaction between teachers and students. So it's how you see it (OBL). The outcomes are determined by how good the teacher is. I think in my experiences, teachers themselves don't always know how to follow this (approach). Sometimes they're lost and so are we. It's still a good thing, but we need more time to learn how to adopt it." One Year 3 student gave a concrete example, "I have taken two courses. The first one impresses me more of the OBL approach. For the second course, the teacher might not be practising and following strictly the OBL approach and the teacher did not explain how the CILOs are assessed/achieved. Without clear instruction or explanation, it makes no difference between OBL and non-OBL."

In terms of mapping assessment tasks with the CILOs, a Year 4 student reflected, "In the course 'Language and Gender', we have to write an essay to analyze authentic materials, maybe a video transcript or a conversation between men and women. And then we have to apply all the concepts, theories about language and gender we've learned in the course. It's related to what we learned in the course and we know what we have to do well in the assignment." Another Year 3 student stated, "I think the teaching and assessment activities map with the CILOs. For example, in the course 'Primary ELT Methods II: Developing Literacy Skills', our teacher provides us with jigsaw reading and tell us what we are going to do is to achieve, for example, CILO1. Every activity is very clear and we know what we are going to achieve."

Feeling positive towards OBL, two students (one in Year 3, one in Year 4) tried it out in their own Teaching Practice. The Year 4 student claimed, "(As practicing teachers,) I think at least we need to give students direction to learn in the lesson. When we did the teaching practice, we focused on what we were going to do to help students to achieve the learning

outcomes and our lesson plans focused on the learning outcomes....” The Year 3 student stated, “Yes, I’ve tried this in my teaching practice, I’ve tried to include the outcomes in every lesson. I told them the outcomes and I think they benefit from them. They know what they’re going to do and they can demonstrate in their assignment. And they’re more conscious about what they’re learning. Usually, I first review the outcomes achieved in previous lessons. Then I tell them the outcomes of the present lesson that the students have to achieve. I found that students were more attentive in class. And also for the homework, I tell them the purpose of doing such kind of homework, I think they can benefit a lot.” Many others who have not tried the OBL approach in their teaching practice claimed that they would like to try it in their future teaching.

Interviews on OBL with Individual Teachers

Six teachers who piloted OBL in their courses were interviewed and the findings are reported below.

Effectiveness of the OBL evaluation data analysis reports

The teachers appreciated the OBL evaluation data analysis reports compiled by the project team Research Assistant. They particularly welcomed the data analysis report of the Mid-course OBL Evaluation because this provided them with students’ comments on their courses and based on these data, they could give timely feedback to students and make necessary adjustment(s) to their teaching in the middle of their courses. One teacher had the following comments: “I think the Mid-course Evaluation is very important because it gives me a sense of how the course is going. I might think it’s going very well but the students might not think so, you know. So it helps to find out whether things are clear, whether they are following everything, whether they are enjoying the course and what changes need to be made accordingly.” To give a more concrete example, another teacher illustrated that he realized from the report that two students found the CILOs not so clear. As he thought he had tried hard to make the CILOs clear, he followed this up and talked to the whole class about it, and found out that the two students who claimed that the CILOs were not so clear actually missed a few important lessons, resulting in missing the chances of getting a good understanding of the CILOs. He then talked to them individually to help them to get a better understanding of the CILOs.

Effectiveness of the Teacher’s Reflection Form

One teacher pointed out that teachers need to do reflections on their teaching from time to time and the reflection form was a productive way to formalize his thinking. To him, without filling in this form, the reflections would be at the conceptual level. But if there was a form to be filled in and teachers were guided by specific questions, colleagues could then give a stronger sense of coherence to their reflection. One merit of filling in the reflection form was that it helped him formalize his thinking.

Problems encountered when piloting OBL courses

Two teachers pointed out the problems they encountered when piloting the OBL courses: One of them sometimes forgot to stick to the CILOs in his teaching, the other found writing CILOs at the beginning to make them match with the requirements of the OBL standard was quite difficult, as she elaborated, “I think initially, at the beginning I have

difficulty in writing the course outcomes to make them match with the requirements of the OBL standard. I even attended the OBL induction courses and some OBL sharing sessions conducted by our colleagues last year, but I still find it difficult to write the CILOs to make them compatible and make them match with the requirement of the OBL.”

Change(s) made to teaching during the OBL piloting process

The teachers claimed that they did not make significant changes to their actual teaching in the classroom after adopting OBL, but they learned to plan their teaching better, and they were more conscious of the CILOs when teaching, as one commented, “I don’t think OBL makes much difference to my actual teaching. I mean, it helps me to justify things that I am always doing. We can connect what all we are doing to the focuses of the Institute overall and I appreciate that.” In other words, in the past, the teachers set a number of course objectives and then taught according to these objectives employing a variety of teaching methods, without clear awareness of the ‘constructive alignment’, but after piloting OBL, they see the clear relationship between the teaching activities and the CILOs, and are able to justify that the teaching activities they designed and implemented are appropriate and effective for helping students to achieve the CILOs.

The significance of OBL

One teacher claimed that OBL helped him to think carefully and clearly of students’ learning outcomes so as to have a very clear mind before teaching and it also helped students to know what they had to achieve in the learning process. Another teacher pointed out that the ‘constructive alignment’ was very important in designing an OBL curriculum: “I found it productive to think from the expected learning outcomes and used these as the basis for organising teaching and learning activities, as well as assessed activities, [.....] One of the outcomes that I expect to see in my students is “demonstrate a sound understanding of the historical background to the spread of English worldwide and the linguistic, social and cultural problems this created.” Obviously, I ought to think about what kinds of activities would help me measure whether or not this has taken place or if so to which extent. I have one activity in mind and that activity has to do with students’ introspective, reflective language diary of their own reflective learning experience.” Another teacher stated, “[.....] I have some informal chats with the students and I ask them something about the OBL. And some students told me they find that after the implementation of OBL they understand more about why they have to do such kinds of course work, they became clearer. So that’s the thing I really appreciate. They could see the linkage and the synergy of the course work, the content, what I taught them in the lectures and also the teaching activities as well as the course work.”

The most unforgettable experience when piloting the OBL courses

Teachers were willing to share their most unforgettable experiences in the OBL Pilot. One teacher stated that in the past he would only give feedback to students in class after the mid-course evaluation. But in piloting the OBL course, it was the first time he tried talking to students individually to find out their problems after receiving the Mid-course OBL evaluation report.

Apart from the above, five teacher interviewees agreed that the external OBL consultant employed by the OBL project team could help them in familiarizing with the OBL approach as he had given them constructive ideas on designing the OBL course outlines in

the face-to-face consultation sessions. As one teacher commented, “I think his comments were useful. In a sense, they were useful because they helped me see things that I did not see, or had not been able to see and that concerned the design of the exam paper.” Another teacher added, “He is helpful. During the meeting with him, he made suggestions on changing two of the CILOs [.....] I thought CILOs should be similar to the objectives set previously. And he told me that the CILOs must be in line with the assessment tasks. So there was drastic change. He was able to clarify, to clear my doubt.” Moreover, one teacher suggested having more promotions of the OBL approach to colleagues and students because many of them were not familiar with the OBL approach.

Teachers’ Reflection Form

Sixteen completed Teachers’ Reflection Forms were received from the teachers who piloted the OBL courses. On the whole, the teachers’ feedback on OBL was positive, though some did express reservation. 81.25% of the teachers claimed that the students found the CILOs clear (as reflected in the two OBL surveys), the learning experiences they provided to their students could help them achieve the CILOs and the assessment tasks did measure the CILOs effectively. When piloting the OBL courses, 62.5% of them did not encounter any difficulties while the others encountered some difficulties, such as the big class size and the teacher’s inexperience in adopting OBL. Around half of them reflected that they needed to revise the CILOs, the content or the assessment tasks in their courses after the pilot. Lastly, a few of them agreed that the external OBL consultant had provided them with invaluable suggestions to the design of the OBL course outlines.

A range of suggestions for improvement were made in the reflection form, for example, spending more time explicitly addressing the CILOs across the courses, simplifying the wording of the CILOs, and revising the CILOs and the assessment tasks so as to make sure they are aligned with each other.

Teachers’ feedback in the OBL Interviews and in the Reflection Form show that they became more conscious of the “constructive alignment” – the alignment among the Course Intended Learning Outcomes, the teaching and learning activities, the assessment tasks and the assessment criteria.

DISCUSSION

There have been debates over OBL for decades, as some believe that OBL helps to establish a clearer focus for students’ learning (Killen, 2000; Biggs & Tang, 2007), while others worry that it might not be flexible enough and might limit students’ learning experience (Towers, 1992; McKernan, 1993; Schwartz and Cavener, 1994). The findings in this research have raised a number of interesting issues related to the debate. One student’s analogy that conceived OBL as a recipe in the focus group interview data seems to suggest that OBL promotes a kind of restricted learning: if one strictly follows a pre-defined recipe, the end product is likely to be the same: the same dish with the same look and same taste. Some might object that education should allow more flexibility, as every learner is different, and unintended learning outcomes are also important. With regard to this issue, it is necessary to clarify what ‘intended learning outcomes’ really mean. Instead of regarding them as the only outcomes of a course, it would be far less limiting if we regard them as the minimum requirements of a course, that is, students are required to at least achieve these intended learning outcomes after the successful completion of the course, but they can certainly achieve other unintended learning outcomes at the same time. The only difference is that, the intended learning outcomes are properly assessed so that we have concrete evidence to tell if

they have been achieved properly at the end of the course. For the unintended learning outcomes, it is up to the teacher and the students to decide how they are to be addressed. Some of them might turn out to be of great importance and might become intended learning outcomes in the future, while others might contribute to the students' personal growth. A student e-Portfolio would be a good idea for collecting evidence of different learning outcomes that students have achieved over the whole period of an academic programme. By the end of the programme, the students will be able to demonstrate how various learning outcomes they have achieved at course level have made sure that they have achieved the programme intended learning outcomes, and indeed the generic intended learning outcomes at institute level.

Another key issue identified in the research data is that, the successful implementation of OBL relies on the student and the teacher's beliefs and attitudes, and many other factors, such as class size. One student's analogy of regarding OBL as a tool best illustrates this point: as a tool, a gun in the hands of a policeman will help to fight the crime, but if it is in the hands of an ordinary citizen, it will not have much effect. If we were to implement OBL successfully, we need to make sure that the teacher and the students clearly see the value of it, and the teacher understands the concept of 'constructive alignment', and is able to design the course and carry out the teaching and assessing activities properly.

One related issue raised in the research data is that, some teachers might have designed the intended learning outcomes properly, but during the actual teaching process, they forgot about them and went off the track, and in the end students might find that the learning activities did not help them to achieve the intended learning outcomes properly. A further issue raised is that, some teachers would only mention the CILOs once at the beginning of the course, and then never mention them again during the study of the course, and students would feel lost later on in the course about what learning outcomes they needed to achieve. These seem to suggest that some teachers have used outcomes as a central part of their teaching and others have not. Students seem to have preferred outcomes to be well integrated. This shows that implementing OBL means that there needs to be a change in the ways teaching is done so that outcomes become the organising principle for teaching and learning. That is, the outcomes need to become the real structuring device for teaching and learning, course organisation, assessment and classroom activities and not simply be descriptions of end results of learning. The tutor should continuously reinforce students' understanding of the CILOs during the course of the study.

The research data seem to have shown some contradictory views from the students and the teachers. While the students claimed that they can see the differences between OBL and the traditional teacher-centred approach, and how their teachers adopted a different approach in their teaching, the teachers seem to claim that they did not make significant changes to their teaching in the classroom. There are a number of possible reasons for the contradiction. First, when students talked about OBL and traditional teaching approach, they were likely comparing their tertiary education experience with their school learning experience, which was typically teacher-centred and exam-driven. Also, many talked about OBL at a theoretical level, and they might be idealizing OBL to some extent, trying to report the possible values and benefits they thought that OBL would bring if implemented properly. As for the teachers, although they claimed that they did not make much change to their actual teaching, they did admit in other interview data that they had made some significant changes to their course design, particularly the conversion of course objectives into course intended learning outcomes, and the alignment of CILOs with assessment tasks, with the help of the OBL consultant. The actual teaching methods might have not changed much, but the teachers were more aware of the CILOs, and of 'constructive alignment', which helped them to better plan their teaching.

Based on the findings, we could conclude that in general, the students were positive towards the OBL approach and they appreciated teachers' course planning and the "constructive alignment" of the courses, which was also the teachers' focus in curriculum design. Moreover, students could distinguish the differences between the traditional teaching approach and OBL and most of them claimed that the latter approach was more beneficial to their learning. They also raised a range of issues, such as the attitudes of the students and the teachers towards OBL, the reinforcement of the understanding of the CILOs, and the class size, which are all factors affecting the successful implementation of OBL.

As for the teachers, to implement OBL successfully, they need to pay attention to a number of important factors:

- CILOs must be relevant, attractive, comprehensible, attainable, and coherent, as clear and realistic CILOs are guidelines for students' learning.
- CILOs must be carefully mapped with the Programme Intended Learning Outcomes (PILOs).
- Teaching & learning activities (TLAs), assessment tasks (ATs) and assessment criteria must all align with the CILOs in curriculum design. The 'constructive alignment' is very important: what we teach and how we assess ought to be aligned with the Course Intended Learning Outcomes, such that they are fully consistent with one another which can help students to achieve the CILOs.
- Formal reflections by students and teachers are important for further improvement of OBL implementation.
- Teachers need to reinforce students' understanding of the CILOs from time to time during the study of a course, especially when assessment tasks are assigned, rather than just mentioning them at the beginning of the course.
- Teachers need to be aware of the students' learning needs, and should modify their teaching plans from time to time based on self-reflection and feedback from students so that the students could learn in the most effective manner and the CILOs could be achieved properly.

CONCLUSION

As a major initiative for curriculum reform, Outcome-Based Learning has been carefully planned and implemented at the Hong Kong Institute of Education since 2008. In this study, the adaptation of OBL in a range of pilot courses in the English Department at HKIEd was evaluated using a series of instruments designed for the study: a Mid-course OBL evaluation Form, an End-of-course OBL evaluation Form, protocols for focus group interviews on OBL with students, protocols for interviews on OBL with individual teachers, and an OBL Teachers' Reflection Form. The evaluation results show that in general both the students and the teachers are positive towards OBL, but a number of issues have been raised. The students could see the differences between OBL and the traditional approach, claiming that if implemented properly it would promote clearly focused and effective teaching and learning, and it helps them to become more active and responsible learners. However, successful implementation of OBL is reliant on a number of factors, such as the students' and teachers' attitudes towards OBL, and reinforcement of understanding of the CILOs during the study of a course. The teachers might not have made significant changes to their teaching methods after adopting OBL, but they did see the importance of the constructive alignment of the Course Intended Learning Outcomes, the teaching and learning activities, the assessment tasks, and the assessment criteria, and agreed that OBL helped them to better plan their teaching. They also see the value of students' feedback and the teacher's self-reflection on OBL for further improvement of OBL implementation. Although there are still many

challenges and issues, OBL is certainly an education philosophy that deserves our attention, and is worthy of serious consideration in the realm of higher education.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Mid-Course OBL Evaluation Form.

Mid-Course OBL Evaluation Form
English Department, HKIED

Course Title: _____

1. How clear do you find the Course Intended Learning Outcomes (CILOs)?
 A. Very clear B. Mostly clear C. Somewhat clear
 D. Not so clear E. Not clear at all
2. To what extent do the teaching and learning activities help you in achieving the outcomes?
 A. Very helpful B. Mostly helpful C. Somewhat helpful
 D. Not so helpful E. Not helpful at all
3. How relevant do you find the assessment tasks to the intended learning outcomes?
 A. Very relevant B. Mostly relevant C. Somewhat relevant
 D. Not so relevant E. Not relevant at all
4. How clear do you find the assessment criteria of the assessment tasks in this course?
 A. Very clear B. Mostly clear C. Somewhat clear
 D. Not so clear E. Not clear at all
5. How confident do you feel of achieving the intended learning outcomes by the end of the course?
 A. Very confident B. Quite confident C. Moderately confident
 D. Not so confident E. Not confident at all

Areas of strength (what you enjoyed and found helpful (content, teaching and learning activities, assessment tasks, etc.)) and reasons

Suggestions for improvement

Table 2: End-of-course OBL Evaluation Form.

End-of-Course OBL Evaluation Form
English Department, HKIED

Course Title: _____

Please read each question very carefully. Use the scale given below and circle the number that is closest to your rating for a given item. Your responses will be kept strictly confidential.

| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|----|--|-------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------------|
| | | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly agree |
| 1 | The stated learning outcomes of the course have a valuable relationship to my degree programme. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2 | The stated learning outcomes are clear and understandable. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3 | What is taught in the course aligns with the stated learning outcomes. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4 | The course activities contribute to my understanding of the course content. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5 | Course activities are well prepared and delivered. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6 | The recommended reading materials /texts are helpful. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7 | There is a clear relationship between the course activities and the stated course learning outcomes. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8 | Course activities have a clear relationship to course assessment. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9 | The course assessment tasks are fair and appropriate. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10 | I can achieve the stated course learning outcomes. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11 | The difficulty of this course was reasonable. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12 | The workload of this course was reasonable. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13 | I enjoyed this course. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

This is the end of the survey. Thank you.

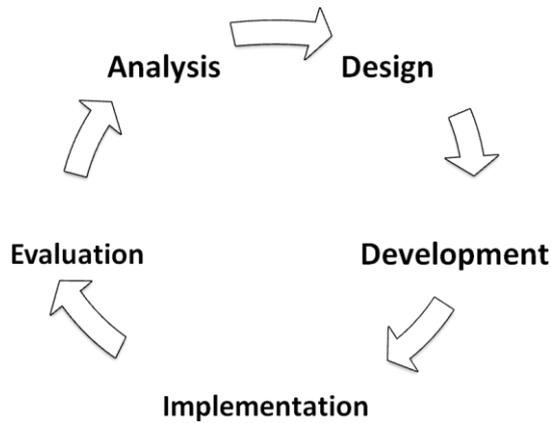


Figure 1. The OBL Loop in curriculum design.

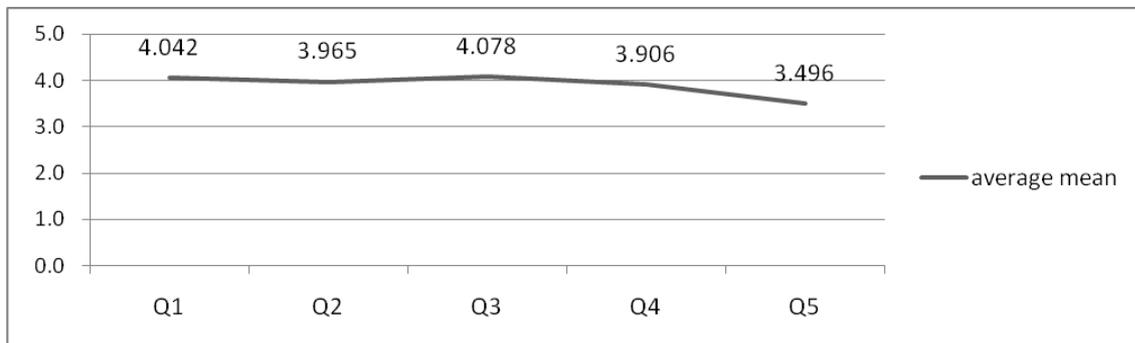


Figure 2. Average mean scores of the items in the Mid-course OBL Evaluation Form

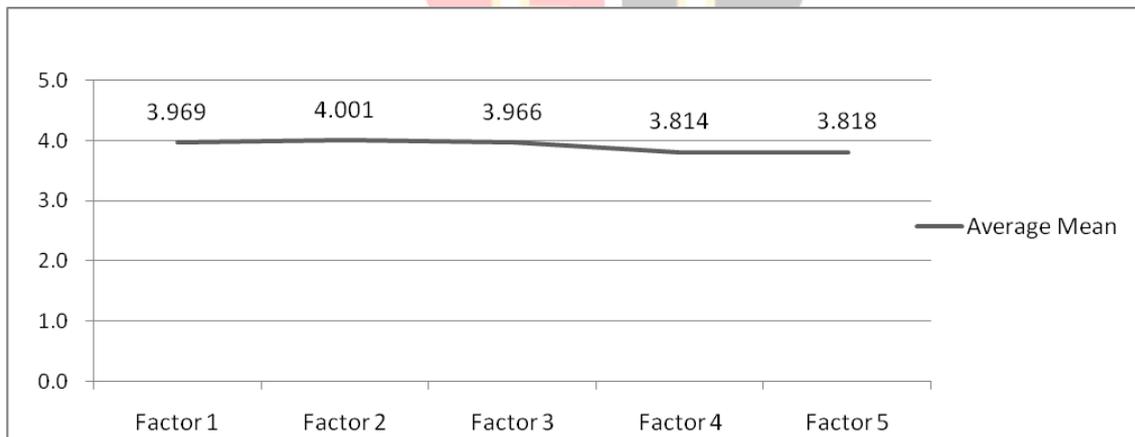


Figure 3. Average mean scores of the five factors (End-of-course OBL evaluation)