Achievement of Course Outcomes in Basic Thermodynamics Course based on Students’ Perception

SITI ROZAIMAH SHEIKH ABDULLAH¹,², MOHD SHAHUDDIN MASTAR² & HASSIMI ABU HASSAN²

¹ Centre for Engineering Education Research,
² Department of Chemical and Process Engineering
Faculty of Engineering and Built Environment,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia,
43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor
MALAYSIA
rozaimah@eng.ukm.my    www.ukm.my/p3k

Abstract:– In an outcome based education (OBE) system, a lecturer teaching any course should outline course outcomes in the course syllabus. Course outcomes are attributes or skills to be achieved by students when the course is completely delivered at the end of a semester. At the beginning of a semester, it is recommended for lecturers to list and inform their students on the course outcomes so that the students will have some ideas what to achieve from the course. The Faculty of Engineering and Built Environment, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) has adopted the OBE approach since Session 2005/2006. Since then, the entire course syllabus should contain the course outcomes. In the Department of Chemical and Process Engineering, basic concepts of thermodynamics has been taught in a course, known as KKKR1134 Chemical Engineering Thermodynamics I, in Semester I for first year students. In order to improve the teaching and learning of this course, a questionnaire was distributed to the first year students to obtain their feedbacks on the achievement of the course outcomes at the beginning and the end of the semester. The results show that the students grab the understandings and skills of the course outcomes towards the end of the semester. The findings from the survey can be the guidelines for the lecture who teaches the course to further improve the delivery so that all students can have a much better understandings on the thermodynamic concepts and achieve the course attributes confidently at the end of the semester.

Key-Words: – course outcomes, concepts of thermodynamics, indirect measurement, students’ perception

1 Introduction
The Faculty of Engineering and Built Environment, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) has adopted the Outcome-Based Education (OBE) [1] for all the programmes offered in the faculty since Semester I Session 2005/2006 [2]. All the programmes have outlined the program educational objectives (PEO) and programme outcomes (PO) at the program level. PEOs are the attributes that graduates from a programme should achieve within 3-5 years after graduation. While, PO are the attributes that students should achieve just after completing a 3 or 4-year programme in the university. These PEOs and POs are correlated to each other, with POs contributing to PEOs.

At the course level, learning course outcomes (CO) that will later contribute to the enhancement and continual quality improvement of a programme are measured. According to [3], learning outcomes or course outcomes are statements of what a student is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a cycle of a learning process. Any lecturer who teaches a course under an OBE system should include the COs in the course syllabus and inform to his/her students in during an introductory lecture of the course content at the beginning of the semester. These COs are an essential part of a teaching and learning process that should be highlighted to students when a semester begins so that students should have a clear overview of what he or she should know, understand, able to do regarding the attended course. At the end of a semester, the lecturer is also recommended to stress again the COs so that the students can flash back and review of what has been covered in the course throughout the semester. The students can ask themselves whether they have grabbed all the attributes and take appropriate actions on any CO that they are lacking of. From the perspective of lectures, they can analyze the student performance...
on the achievements of the CO to further improve their delivery methods in coming semesters or sessions. The CO achievement can be assessed through direct and indirect measurements [4]. The direct measurements include through grades of quizzes, tutorials, projects and examinations. On the other hand, the CO achievement by students can be assessed indirectly through course evaluations (during the semester and end-of-semester). This measurement can be conducted through a survey from which the feedbacks will portray the achievements of the COs based on students’ perception.

This action research aims to assess the achievement of course outcomes for the fundamentals of thermodynamic course through an indirect measurement of a questionnaire.

2 Fundamentals of Thermodynamics

Thermodynamics is a course that explores the concepts of heat and how it can be converted to power, and covers all aspects of energy and energy transfer including power production, refrigeration and property relation of substances. This course has a history of being labeled as one of tough courses. Therefore, it is a challenge for any lecturer who teaches thermodynamics to convince and make students understand the basics concepts of thermodynamics especially the concepts of entropy and Second Law of Thermodynamics which seems to student as abstract things [5], [6], [7], [8]. There are many approaches being applied and used by dedicated educators in order to gain students’ interests to learn thermodynamics. These include using simulation programmes to perform virtual experiments to promote understanding of the abstract thermodynamics concepts [5], [6]. Haglund and Jeppsson [9] used self-generated analogies to introduce abstract concepts in teaching thermodynamics. This approach allows students to learn a new object of study, a target domain, by comparing with a more familiar source domain. El-Awad and Elseory [10] have introduced the application of Microsoft Excel to develop computerised tables that can automatically determine the thermodynamic properties. Due to the increasing and rapid usage of ICT nowadays, Nancheva et al. [11] has explored the teaching of thermodynamics through a web-based application.

In the Department of Chemical and Process Engineering, UKM, two programmes are offered: Chemical Engineering Programme and Biochemical Engineering Programme. The curriculum for both programmes requires first year students to undertake two consecutive compulsory courses on thermodynamics. For Semester I, the students should attend KKKR1134 Chemical Engineering Thermodynamics I and KKKR1244 Chemical Engineering in the Semester II. The basic concepts of thermodynamics is covered under KKKR1134 and the second thermodynamic course, KKKR1124 covers the phase equilibrium and solution thermodynamics for pure and multicomponent mixtures. The KKKR1134 course exposes first-year chemical engineering students to the basic concepts of thermodynamics such as the properties of pure substances, the first law of thermodynamics, entropy and the second law of thermodynamics and on the thermodynamic applications of power and refrigeration cycles. The syllabus covers the First Law and Second Law of Thermodynamics and how these two laws are applied on closed systems and control volumes (Fig. 1). Students should grab the understandings of the principles of these two laws and know to apply these two laws on the two different types of systems since each system requires different approach to apply the two laws as illustrated in Fig. 1. Before the two laws can be applied, students should acquire the skills to obtain relevant data from property tables such as Steam Table or property diagrams.

Table 1 lists the six course outcomes that students should achieve at the end of a semester for KKKR1134 course. All COs except CO2 are the skills and attributes that can be achieved through lectures. CO2 is the course outcome to be acquired through laboratory works regarding temperature and pressure measurements. CO1 requires students to understand some definitions of thermodynamic terms such as temperature, pressure, system, property, states, cycles and equilibrium. All these thermodynamic terms will be used and encountered throughout the syllabus. Subsequently, students should be able to identify the properties of substances on property diagrams and obtain the data from property tables (CO3). Without this skill, students fail to proceed solving any thermodynamic problem although they understand how to apply the two laws. CO4 illustrates the students how the energy can be transferred through a system boundary. Once the students gain this attributes, they should know how to apply the First Law of Thermodynamics on closed and control volume systems (CO5). Finally, the concept of entropy and the Second Law of Thermodynamics will be introduced and used in analyzing the thermal efficiencies of heat engines such as Carnot and Rankine cycles and the coefficients of performance for refrigerators (CO6).
Fig. 1. Summary of the syllabus covered in KKKR1134 Chemical Engineering Thermodynamics I
### Table 1. List of Course Outcomes (COs) for the course of KKKR1134 Chemical Engineering Thermodynamics I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Course outcomes (COs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CO1</td>
<td>Ability to understand the basic concepts of thermodynamic such as temperature, pressure, system, properties, process, state, cycles and equilibrium.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO2</td>
<td>Ability to conduct experiments regarding the measurement and calibration of temperatures and pressures in groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO3</td>
<td>Ability to identify the properties of substances on property diagrams and obtain the data from property tables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO4</td>
<td>Ability to define energy transfer through mass, heat and work for closed and control volume systems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO5</td>
<td>Ability to apply the first Law of Thermodynamics on closed and control volume systems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO6</td>
<td>Ability to apply Second Law of Thermodynamics and entropy concepts in analyzing the thermal efficiencies of heat engines such as Carnot and Rankine cycles and the coefficients of performance for refrigerators.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 3 Research Methodology

In order to improve the quality of the teaching and learning process for the fundamentals of thermodynamic course, a course evaluation was conducted by distributing a questionnaire to the first year students of Chemical Engineering Programme in the Department of Chemical and Process Engineering, UKM, who has attended KKKR1134 Chemical Engineering Thermodynamics I in Semester I Session 2012/2013. The questionnaire was distributed to 22 students on week 11 of a 14-week lecture time, after the entire course syllabus has been completely covered. The questionnaire was designed in such a way that the students are required to give their feedbacks on the achievement of the six outlined course outcomes (Table 1) at the beginning of the semester as well as at the end of the semester according to a Likert scale as listed below:

- **Scale 0**  No idea
- **Scale 1**  Know specific facts, terms, concepts, principles or theories
- **Scale 2**  Understand and able to interpret specific facts, terms, concepts, principles or theories
- **Scale 3**  Able to apply related theories to new situations and able to solve related problems
- **Scale 4**  Able to use the related knowledge and theories to design a chemical or biochemical engineering system
- **Scale 5**  Able to use the related knowledge and theories to analyze and evaluate a chemical or biochemical engineering systems

These scales are arranged according to 5-tier Bloom’s Taxonomy of cognitive learning skills [12].

#### 4 Results and Discussions

Fig. 2 depicts the students’ feedbacks on the achievement of the six course outcomes at the beginning of the semester and at the end of semester respectively. Obviously at the beginning of the semester, the students’ feedbacks were skewed to Scale 0, 1 and 2 since the students were still vague on all the thermodynamics concepts of the First and Second Law of Thermodynamics. At the end of the semester, the feedbacks have shifted to Scale 3 and 4, indicating that most students have grabbed some understandings on the basic concepts and shown the ability to use and apply the two laws. About 75-90% of students felt that they were able to use and apply the two laws confidently (Scale 3, 4 and 4).

In order to quantify the students’ feedbacks, all the scores were converted into mark percentage in order to evaluate the average performance of students in achieving the attributes. Fig. 3 compares the average marks obtained by students at the beginning and at the end of semester on each course outcome. On average, students scored only 15-30% for all the outcomes at the beginning of the semester with the lowest mark portrayed by CO6 which is related to apply the Second Law of Thermodynamics on the power and refrigeration cycles. This might due to the facts that the students had just finished learning on the last chapter of power and refrigeration cycle at the time when they were asked to give feedbacks on the outcomes. At
the end of the semester, students scored 55-70% which on average it is equivalent to Grade B, on the achievement of the outcomes. There is no significant difference between the scores of each CO. Again, the lowest mark is depicted by the last CO that has just recently covered by the lecturer on week 11. The findings from this survey can be used by the lecturer to further improve the delivery methods on the course and to convince students that this course is not a tough subject as inherited from generation that this subject as a “killer subject” among the students [6], [12]. The course can be enjoyable by always relating the application of First and Second Law of Thermodynamics in daily lives.

In future, this indirect measurement of CO achievements will be compared with the direct measurement through marks students obtain through laboratory reports, quizzes, projects and examinations.

Fig. 2. Respondent’s agreement on the achievement of course outcomes for KR1134 Chemical Engineering Thermodynamics I at (a) the beginning and (b) end of semester
4 Conclusions
For the improvement of teaching and learning in basic concepts of thermodynamics course, a survey on the achievement of the course outcomes was distributed to the first year students in the Department of Chemical and Process Engineering, UKM. Based on the feedbacks from the survey, students have shown no confidence in the achievement of the six course outcomes at the beginning of the semester. However, towards the end of the semester, students started to regain the confidence to achieve the understanding attributes and skills of the basic concepts of thermodynamics. Lectures who handle the course should always have the effort and initiatives to further improve the delivery of the course.

Acknowledgment
The authors would like to thank Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) for funding this action research (PTS-2012-003).

References:


