

A CLASSROOM ACTION RESEARCH: IMPROVING SPEAKING SKILLS THROUGH INFORMATION GAP ACTIVITIES

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ABSTRACT

The research was based on a preliminary study on the causes of problems related to the students' inability to speak English. One of the research objectives is to describe the atmosphere in improving speaking by using activities in the Information Gap Technique (IGT). The researcher and the collaborator worked together in designing the lesson plans, implementing the actions, making observations and reflecting on the results. The subjects of this research study were second semester students from the English Department at Almuslim University. This study was conducted in three cycles following the procedures for action research, namely planning, implementing, observing and reflecting. To collect data, the researcher used instruments of observations, lists, tests and questionnaires. The data obtained was presented in two ways, qualitatively and quantitatively. The findings showed that IGT activities were effective in improving the speaking abilities of the student in class. This can be seen from the improvements after each cycle. This can be seen by the rise in the students' mean scores in the test results: 58.8 in the first cycle, 68 in the second cycle and 81.3 in the third cycle. Improvement was also seen based on the results from the observations that showed positivity, and good responses from the students. From the questionnaire results, it was found that the mean score for the students' perception was 3,616. This means that the students responded positively to the implementation of this technique.

Key Words: Improving Speaking Skills, Information Gap Activities, Classroom Action Research

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is one of the productive activities in daily life and is the most important language skill because it is the main skill needed to carry out a conversation. Besides, speaking is an interactive process for constructing and receiving information. Specifically, the mastery of speaking is a priority for students in schools and universities. In the communicative model of speaking class, the students should be taught how to speak well by using the components of English speaking skills, such as communication, grammar, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension.

Basically, teaching speaking is a very important part of teaching English. The ability to communicate in the target language clearly and efficiently contributes to the success of the learners at school and at university levels. Therefore, it is essential that English teachers and lecturers pay great attention to teaching speaking instead of leading students to learn grammar by memorization alone. English teachers and lecturers should provide a rich environment where meaningful communication takes place. With this aim, various speaking activities which can contribute to students developing communication skills necessary for life should be introduced into English classes. These activities make students more active and interested in the classroom tasks and at the same time these also make their learning more meaningful and enjoyable.

At the higher education levels, English lecturers can choose from many models for their speaking classes. The Directorate General of Higher Education (Sub Direktorat KPS, 2008:26) states that “the teaching learning process in the classroom must be modified with some models such as SCL (Student Centered Learning), namely: small group discussions, role play, simulations, case studies, discovery learning, cooperative learning, etc.”. All of these models are highly recommended to develop students’ ability in getting better communication skills. As a result, students will be more able to prepare themselves to participate in the future of their social life and will have proficient skills.

Furthermore, the objective of teaching speaking at higher education levels or university level as stated in the Directorate General of Higher Education (Sub Direktorat KPS, 2008), directives is aimed at training the students to be able to interpret the content of various oral texts and respond to them interactively in interesting activities. Then, the

students are expected to be able to speak effectively in various contexts to convey information, thoughts and feelings as well as to build social relationships.

In conducting the curriculum, some English lecturers view changes as extra work. In addition, some English lecturers are reluctant to learn new teaching methods or techniques and competencies as an attempt to increase their abilities. It has also been found that English lecturers tend to reject pedagogical strategies or teaching methods that are different from what they have been using. They are reluctant to change or modify their current instructional strategies and understandings of classroom practice; they are reluctant to change their personal paradigms.

In teaching speaking, an English lecturer may face a lot of problems in class. Ur (1996:121) says there are four problems that arise in speaking classes:

- Inhibition: worried about making mistakes or fearful of criticism or losing face, or simply shy of the attention that their speech attracts
- Nothing to say: cannot think of anything to say
- Low or uneven participation: because of the tendency of some learners to dominate, others speak very little or not at all
- Mother tongue use: learners prefer to use their mother language than the target language in class or at any time.

Based on the researcher's experience in semester two of English studies with the English Department of Almuslim University, some problems in the teaching and learning processes related to the researcher's and students' activities in the classroom are explained as the following.

The English lecturer still implemented the conventional method in teaching such as grammar translation, audio lingual and direct method in which he tended to directly ask them to create and memorize dialogues without giving enough time to practice together and take part in speaking activities. Furthermore, many students still had some lexical problems in speaking skills. The first one was related to students speaking ability such as vocabulary, good grammar and pronunciation. The second one was the students' lack of motivation in speaking because the lecturer only gave the monotonous topics to the students so most of them were reluctant to show their speaking ability and the lecturer only asked certain active students to speak.

Finally, the students had a lack of opportunity to speak due to the limited time. The English lecturer gave opportunities only to a few

students who had good ability in speaking. Consequently, most of the students only listened and remained silent. After the class was almost over, the lecturer gave out tasks to all students about the previous and the next class's materials.

These conditions resulted in the students having an average score in English of only 58.2. To increase the students' low score, there are some objectives set in the syllabus for teaching speaking. The first is to help the students overcome their initial reluctance to speak, to encourage and provide opportunities, and start speaking from speaking about something simple. The second is asking students to talk about what they want to talk about. The third is asking students to talk about what they are able to talk about. The fourth is providing appropriate feedback. The fifth is combining speaking with listening and reading. The last is incorporating the teaching of speech acts in teaching speaking (Florez, 1990).

To improve the students' speaking, the researcher needed to create a creative class by conducting a suitable technique called Information Gap Technique (IGT). It was suggested by Raptou (2001:211) that "information gap is a useful activity in which one person has information that the other lacks. All of the speakers must use the target language to share the missing information". For instance, a student has the directions to a party and he must give them to a classmate. One type of speaking activity involves the so-called 'information gap' – where two speakers have different parts of information making up a whole. Because they have different information, there is a 'gap' or information gap. Getting students to have a discussion like having them to take part to give information without a gap will bring the students into a new situation. Lumengkewas (2004:4) says "such situation of learning will help the students to reduce their anxiety and feel comfortable to express their ideas in communicating in the target language". It is believed that learning English speaking using IGT will motivate them to speak.

Considering the positive impact of the implementation of IGT above, the researcher was motivated to apply this technique in teaching speaking to improve the students' speaking skills and to overcome the problems they faced in learning to speak. Based on the assumption, the researcher conducted a Classroom Action Research (CAR) project to improve students' speaking skills through the implementation of IGT.

The Research Questions

Based on the background above, the research questions were formulated as follows:

1. Does using the Information Gap Technique (IGT) improve the process of teaching and learning of speaking skills of students in semester II of the English Department at Almuslim University?
2. What improvements are found in the students' speaking skills as a result of implementing IGT?
3. How did the students respond to the implementation of IGT?

Objectives of Study

This study has some objectives in line with the problems stated above:

- To describe the atmosphere in improving the teaching of speaking to the students by using IGT.
- To know whether the students' scores in speaking improved after using IGT.
- To know the responses from the students after implementing IGT.

Success Indicators

To collect the data and to assess the student's ability in speaking through information gap, the researcher needs to state the criteria of success that can be designed according to some indicators as listed below:

- The students' participation is an indicator of success of IGT. The mean percentage of the students' participation should reach the criteria of good or 70%.
- The success indicators are also stated from the researcher's performance in implementing IGT in teaching and learning speaking. The researcher's performance should achieve the criteria of excellent or should reach 80%.
- The students' average score after teaching and learning in the third cycle should be 75 or higher.
- The success indicators are also from the students' responses toward the implementation of IGT in teaching and learning speaking. The mean score from questionnaires completed by the students should reach the criteria of strongly agree or 3.3 – 4.0.

Significance of this Study

This study can contribute through information to improve the teaching of speaking in the English Department at Al-Muslim University, especially in improving the students' speaking performance to communicate in the target language (English). Furthermore, the findings from this research are expected to be a meaningful contribution for the lecturers in understanding that IGT can be a good alternative strategy for teaching students to enable them to speak better in English.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of Information Gap Technique

Information Gap Technique (IGT) challenge students to exchange information in order to complete a lesson plan activity. Most IGT work is done in pairs where each student has a part of information on a task to be done. According to Harris (1990), IGT is a good strategy for learning ESL because the activities provide good practice for using sentences which the students have just learned. IGT also gives the students chances to speak, interact and exchange information amongst them. The activities also make the lesson easy to understand and the students will speak more than their teacher does.

In addition, Kayi (2006) mentioned that IGT are learning activities in which each student has a duty to work with his/her partner. One student has certain information which the other student does not have. Each student has different information. In this way, the students have to exchange information in order to complete the missing one or to fill in the gap. In other words, IGT provide good activities for problem solving or collecting information. Each partner must be active in asking questions and providing answers by means of interaction and taking turns. The assigned task, completing the missing information cannot be completed by both partners unless they both communicate actively in English.

Using IGT Activities in the Speaking English Class

Activities in IGT are useful for speaking classes. In an activity, one person has certain information that must be shared with others in order to solve a problem, gather information or make decisions (Neu & Reeser, 1997). These types of activities are extremely effective in the ESL classroom. They give every student the opportunity to speak in the

target language for an extended period of time and students naturally produce more speech than they would otherwise. In addition, speaking with peers is less intimidating than presenting in front of the entire class and being evaluated. Another advantage of IGT activities is that students are forced to negotiate meaning because they must make what they are saying comprehensible to others in order to accomplish the task (Neu & Reeser, 1997). Ur (1996) lists the characteristics of a successful speaking activity:

- Learners talk a lot: As much as possible of the period of time allotted to the activity is in fact occupied by learner talk.
- Participation is even: Classroom discussion is not dominated by a minority of talkative participants; all get a chance to speak, and contributions are fairly evenly distributed.
- Motivation is high: Learners are eager to speak because they are interested in the topic and have something new to say about it, or because they want to contribute to achieving a common task objective.
- Language is of an acceptable level: Learners express themselves in utterances that are relevant, easily comprehensible to each other, and of an acceptable level of language accuracy.

IGT activities satisfy all of the above criteria. The teacher simply explains the activity and reviews the vocabulary needed for the activity. Students are then on their own to complete the task. Each participant plays an important role because the task cannot be accomplished without everyone's participation. Many IGT activities are highly motivational because of the nature of various tasks. Activities that require the solving of a problem or a mystery are especially effective. Teachers should know whether an activity is of an acceptable level of difficulty for students. If students are sufficiently prepared for the activity, the level of language accuracy will be acceptable.

IGT activities can also reinforce vocabulary and a variety of grammatical structures taught in class. They allow students to use linguistic forms and functions in a communicative way. These activities bring the language to life for the students. Students have the opportunity to use the building blocks of the language they are learning to speak in the target language.

The Teaching of Speaking

Speaking is an important part of foreign language learning and teaching. Despite its importance, for many years, teaching speaking has

been undervalued. English teachers have continued to teach speaking only as memorization of dialogue. Nowadays the goal of teaching speaking is to improve the communication skills of the students. As stated by Brown, (1994) and Burns and Joyce (1997), speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information. Further, Nunan (1991:14) defines speaking as an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving, and processing information orally. According to the 2004 Competency Based Curriculum (CBC) in Indonesia, speaking refers to the ability to speak effectively in different contexts to give information, to express ideas and feelings as well as to build social relationship in the form of activities which are varied interactively and interestingly.

In learning speaking skills, learners not only should know how to produce specific points of language such as grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary but they also should understand when, why, and in what ways to produce language. Consequently, learners often evaluate their success in language learning as well as the effectiveness of their English course on the basis of how much they feel they have improved their spoken language proficiency. Richards (2008:19) confirms that “oral skills have hardly been neglected in EFL/ESL courses (witness the huge number of books on conversation and other aspects of speaking on the market), although the approach to the teaching of oral skills has long been the focus of methodological debates”.

Efficiency of communication is the goal of teaching speaking skills. Learners should be able to make themselves understood using their current proficiency to the fullest. They must try to avoid confusion in their messages due to mispronunciation, mismatched grammar, or vocabulary mismatches and to observe the social and cultural rules that apply in each communication situation. They are expected to develop their communication skills to accustom themselves to express their thoughts, feeling and experiences in various different contexts. Lado (1964:51) specifies that to know the language, learners have to use it until they are able to speak it. He further states that a student does not know a sentence until he can speak it clearly and be understood; a very good rule is “learn what you can use and use what you learn”.

The goal of teaching speaking at universities is to train the students to be able to speak English with communicative competence. Richards (2005:2) says that communicative competence includes the following aspects of language knowledge:

- Knowing how to use language for a range of different purposes and functions.
- Knowing how to vary the use of language according to the setting and the participants (e.g. knowing when to use formal and informal speech or when to use language appropriate for written as opposed to spoken communication).
- Knowing how to produce and understand different type of texts, e.g. narratives, reports, interviews and conversations.
- Knowing how to maintain communication despite having limitations in one's language, e.g. through using different kinds of communication strategies.

By learning these aspects, the teaching exposes the students to situations where they have to express their thoughts, ideas and feelings. Since this can bring the students to think creatively and expressively when they express what they are speaking about, it is considered important in terms of teaching.

Further Lado (1964) as quoted by Lamasiara (2004:16), states that language is intimately tied to man's feelings and activities. It is bound with nationality, religion, culture, social status and occupation. An individual can express his/her feelings well by learning from others on how to express them.

Some Problems in Teaching Speaking

Getting a student to speak in the classroom is not an easy thing. A creative activity is needed from the teacher to motivate the students to speak. Bowen, Madsen and Hilferty (1985:100) suggest using a waiting time until the spirit moves someone to utter a word, phrase or sentence. Nevertheless, according to them, classroom time is too valuable to spend a lot of it quietly waiting and meanwhile the other students are getting restive. Probably, the easiest way is to ask students to speak and to tell one of them what to say. It is much better than waiting for an uncertain utterance.

The difficulties of speaking, as Brown (2001:324) states, are caused by what he calls affective factors and interaction effects. Affective factors refer to a learner's anxiety over the risk of blurting things out that are wrong, silly and/or incomprehensible. The language ego that informs people "you are what you speak" makes the learner reluctant to be judged by the listeners. Besides the affective factor, it turns out that the greatest difficulty that learners encounter in the attempt to speak is not the multiplicity of sounds, words, phrases and discourses that

characterize, language, but rather the interactive nature of communication. Brown (ibid) calls this the interaction effect.

Actually, it is obvious that students' problems come from various factors. Burns and Joyce (1997:134), then, try to generalize the factors into three groups, namely: cultural factors, linguistic factors, and psychological or affective factors. They conclude that reviewing factors that can affect language learning and identifying the underlying reasons for students' reluctance to speak in class will help teachers to create the most positive environment for these learners to start to "chirp"..

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is a Classroom Action Research (CAR) program which is intended to make a contribution to the improvement of teachers' knowledge, style, technique and method in the classroom, and to give insight into the behavior of both teachers and students in applying the IGT. The research was done at Almuslim University at Matang Glumpang Dua in Bireuen District, Aceh. It uses an action research design in order to answer the research problem. In addition, the primary aim of the research is improving the quality of teaching and learning in speaking classes. This study tries to describe the implementation of IGT to provide an improved way for teachers to teach speaking. This CAR employs a collaborative research design. The researcher and her collaborative classroom teacher directly conducted the study. To cope with the problems found in the classroom in teaching speaking, the researcher applied IGT during the teaching and learning processes. Here, the researcher acted as the practitioner who taught the students with IGT to practice speaking English.

Sources of Data

To get the data about the improvement in the speaking ability of the students, the researcher used data from the results of the students' tests in three cycles. Further, to observe the data of the students' response toward the process of learning by using IGT, the researcher got the data using a questionnaire. In this study, the researcher used data (1) from observing the students' activities, (2) from the interviews between the researcher and the students, (3) from the questionnaire and also (4) from the students' answers from each quiz conducted at the end of each cycle during IGT implementation in the teaching and learning activities.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the implementation of IGT, materials were provided to meet certain vocabulary and grammatical targets. The implementation allowed the learners to discuss the topics with their partner in order to compose dialogue. In every meeting, the students were given different topics with some suitable vocabulary such as food and drink, clothes, TV programs, songs and music, work experiences, holidays, effects of the internet, my hometown, and a map of London, UK.

The IGT implementation in classroom interaction had contributed students to the automatic knowledge in starting and building the classroom interaction. The researcher also used the motivating techniques to push students to speak each other. The lost control and the selected correction provided during the practice process were believed as the real determinants in promoting the confidence and participation spirit. These notions had contributed some interference in the classroom such as laughter, local language expression used and less focus. This happen in spontaneous communication as the students did not apply their monitor control utterances.

The implementation of IGT was carried out with very less control of the grammatical correction. These had caused the students to focus on meaning negotiation and forgot the formal language patterns. Consequently, the students' achievement dropped in the aspect. And this forced the researcher to pay more attention to the field. In the third cycle, the researcher begins the implementation by asking the students and monitoring their ability in speaking such as grammar and vocabulary. The researcher also started to provide grammatical input and new vocabulary as the response to students' mistakes. Fortunately, the correction did not disturb the classroom activity that had been working well. The grammar and vocabulary correction had also increased the students' achievement in the aspects as well as made them to pass with better scores compared to the last cycle.

During the implementation of IGT, the researcher used and modified some materials to meet the level of competence of students. The suited materials, where the students were introduced to some new vocabulary, accelerated the learning process as they could understand more about the topic. The introduction to a large number of new words, either new in terms of pronunciation might contribute to the impairment of the drill process. In the classroom, the students would keep asking and confirming lecturer about the new words. The

phenomenon was emerged in the first and second cycle. To resolve the problem, the researcher had to reduce the number of new lexes in the materials for the following meetings.

Subsequently, the speaking class at Almuslim University, the implementation of IGT had contributed to successful improvements in the scores of students. The factors that lead to this point were the teachers' performance, classroom atmosphere, instructional planning, and teaching materials. The determined factors had to work synergistically to allow learners to be comfortable when interacting in the classroom. When students felt free to make their own conversation they would fully participate in the classroom activities. In this condition, the students would be easily stimulated and dragged to meet the instructional goals

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusion

According to the research findings and discussion described previously there are some conclusions that follow. First, the teacher, before implementing IGT, did some preparations in dividing the teaching process into two phases, namely, the preparation and the implementation of the strategy in the classroom. The preparation also covered the objective, dividing students into groups or pairs and selecting suitable materials by designing the lesson plan. The implementation consisted of brainstorming, dividing students into pairs, giving clear instructions on how the students should proceed to do the activities. As a result, there was improvement in the students' scores following the teaching processes from 53.6% in the pretest to 71.8% after stage 1 and to 98.1% after stage 2.

Second, the pair work in some of the IGT activities provided a chance for students to give some information or knowledge and to build their self-esteem in learning. This activity required the students to work cooperatively in their pairs where they had to speak and express information, feelings and ideas. The improvement of the students' activities can be indicated from the improvement in the scores from the tests from 45%, to 69.2 %, and to 97.1 % at the end.

Third, in the implementation of this strategy, the students responded positively toward the use of IGT in their speaking class. Based on their opinions, this strategy could make them study better, comprehend the lessons better, become more motivated, respect each other more and

overcome shyness to speak in doing some activities. As a result the mean score of the students' perception toward the implementation of IGT was 3.616, which belongs to the criteria of "strongly agree" with IGT.

Suggestions

Seeing the improvement in speaking by students in using IGT, it is recommended that English teachers of speaking use the technique, because it can improve the students' speaking skills. Furthermore, the teachers can follow some steps: first, select an interesting instructional media and prepare it well. Second, the teacher should not forget to design instructional procedures and prepare the assessment procedures. When using IGT, the teachers should manage time effectively so that activities can be done well. Finally, the teachers must explain the technique well so that all students understand on what they have to do.

It is also recommended that other researchers conduct further research on IGT by using various interesting topics in order to find out other strengths of this technique and also to investigate its weaknesses if any.

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