IMPROVING SPEAKING ABILITY THROUGH EXPERIENCE BASED ACTIVITIES

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Abstract: This article is a report of a three-cycle classroom action research conducted to improve speaking ability of English Course Students. The research is aimed at identifying (1) typical problems in speaking activity are faced by the students joining at Conversation Class at Active English Course Tenggarong, and (2) language aspects of speaking activity that make students joining in Conversation Class at Active English Course are difficult to have speaking activity. Using three-cycle of action as the steps of teaching, this study revealed that students are at their confidence to speak after teaching models, variation of teaching, and presence of a native speaker of English in the classroom are used as teaching variation. Students’ problems on limited vocabulary, limited knowledge on grammar, and psychological barriers are eliminated during the three steps of teaching. Mistakes on grammar, more pauses when speaking, and topic switching are main other main problems. These problems should be manipulated through informal discussion as feedbacks at the end of the session.

Keywords: speaking class, reciprocal, classroom action research.

TO MASTER oral English for communication has been a salient issue in teaching learning English in Indonesia simply because junior high school graduates mastered very low achievement in English. Researches conducted by Quinn (1975) and Huda (1988) indicated that SMU students’ mastery in English is low. Quinn (in Wahab, 1995) revealed that among 4,000 students graduated from SMU throughout Indonesia, only 4.5% were considered to master good English. Huda confirmed Quinn’s research through a research in eight provinces of Indonesia where out of 4,000 student’s samples who were targeted to achieve 2,000 vocabularies in SMU, only 200 words were mastered.

Careful observation in the classroom revealed that most students were curious to speak English for jobs. To students, oral English proficiency helped them ease to find job especially in companies. English is a requisite skill to increase their careers.

As a matter of facts, most students are in low level of required knowledge of English. They know little about grammar and vocabulary but they simple believe that English for oral communication can soon be acquired. In addition, students are not in high self-motivation so that if they have to do a little hard assignment out of their prior knowledge, they are absent for the sessions or even they drop from the class. What then the teachers get difficulty to facilitate what the students are going to achieve from the course.

This study is about a conversation class conducted at Active English Course Tenggarong. The participants want to achieve oral English as their main goal from the course. With regard to student’s basic knowledge Sadtono (1995:23) notes that as the main objective of teaching is the reading ability, we are thus concerned with the problems of
structure and vocabulary, and understanding sentences, phrases. Class conversation is based upon ungrammatical sentences and communications are conducted merely under the acceptable ideas and expressions. As a result, model of teaching for the need of the class conversation, firstly, neglects the use of grammar for the focus of discussion.

Such kind of teaching model might be applicable for the students of English Course since it is a non-formal learning where teaching program is designed mostly to support consumers’ wants. Besides, the short-term time teaching materials are simply designed to go in line with the learning goal.

Above illustration is close to the “value” of speaking stated by Bygate (1987:1). Bygate describes two distinctive positions of speaking where the role of the native speaker of a language is very important. To him, speaking is in many ways an undervalued skill. Perhaps this is because we can almost all speak, and so take the skill too much for granted. Speaking is often thought of as a popular form of expression, which uses the unprestigious colloquial register.

However, speaking as the one skill, which indicates the mastery of foreign language, has different side. It might be the most prestigious ability for the learners of a foreign language where they have to be able to confidently speak. As Bygate (1987) also points out that speaking are, however, a skill, which deserves attention every bit as much as literary skills, in both first and second languages. Our learners often need to be able to speak with confidence in order to carry out many of their most basic transactions. It is the skill by which they are most frequently judged, and through which they may make lose friends. It is the vehicle par excellence of social solidarity, of social ranking, or professional advancement and business. It is also a medium, which much language is learned, and which for many is particularly conductive for learning.

It is, therefore, useful for the teachers of English to identify students’ various capacity to speak, and to outline some ways in which we may be able to get a better understanding of how our learners to speak a foreign language through various tasks which can be made available to them. To do this, oral exercises, classroom activities, and appropriate teaching methods are of important points.

To make this study more focused, this study is aimed to know: (1) typical problems in speaking activity are faced by the students joining at Conversation Class at Active English Course Tenggarong, and (2) language aspects of speaking activity that make students joining in Conversation Class at Active English Course are difficult to have speaking activity.

This study was expected to provide evidence in teaching learning process of speaking for English course participants in general and for university students who were of equal level in particular. The significance related to selecting appropriate teaching methodologies in speaking and activities or teaching materials for speaking class. In terms of methods of teaching, the significance dealt major techniques to arouse students with speaking activities and variations of teaching which included exposures of speaking classes and the use of English as the major medium of interactions in the class. In selecting activities for the whole class, this research provided typical of major performances for the class organization in line with the levels of teaching materials.

Practically, teachers of English who taught speaking were able to use the results of this research as their reference to select teaching method, selecting activities and selecting teaching materials suitable for their framework. To the Course Institutions, the results of this research were useful to plan a main program to offering conversation class and to

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identify students need, level and goal of learning English for speaking purposes. The results were also meaningful to develop syllabus, class design and course outline.

Theories underlying this study included communicative competence as the teaching method, and vocabulary and grammar as the basic knowledge to have starting point in English. Teaching of English should not be based on grammar, but the communicative competence. However, the role of grammar as the basic knowledge to master English is of a willy-nilly effort to maintain.

In addition, Wilkins (1976) states that the acquisition of the grammatical system of a language remains a most important element in language learning. Grammar is the means through which linguistic creativity is ultimately achieved and an adequate knowledge of grammar would lead to serious limitations on the capacity for communication.

Other factor that makes the mastery of language fluent is basic knowledge on vocabulary. Sadtono (1995) mentions that 85% of instructors stated that the reading ability of their student’s standard is poor mainly because students are poor in structure and vocabulary. In addition, Bygate (1987) states that it is obvious that in order to be able to speak a foreign language, it is necessary to know a certain amount of grammar and vocabulary.

**RESEARCH METHOD**

This study is qualitative in nature, using classroom action research as the research design. By qualitative approach that used setting in the classroom, this study relied the natural data set in a specific case of classroom interactions. Bogdan and Knopp (1983) suggest that in conducting qualitative research, the researcher is the key-instrument and data are explored as what they are. The researcher did not control and manipulate the data to be what he designed but it was explored as what the data existed when research was conducted.

For the purpose, the present study employed classroom action research design as proposed by Elliot (Hopkins, 1993:49). This design used three-cycle scheme carried out in the actual classroom practices. MeNiff (1988) outlines that there are four main activities in each cycle of action research: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. The three steps of action of this study referred to Elliot (1993) that employed planning, acting, and reflecting for the implementation of actions in Step 1, Step 2, and Step 3.

The subject of this research was English Course students joining in Conversation Class at Active English Course Tenggarong. The number of the subject was 13 students. The students were of almost equal in competence. The homogeneity was revealed from the entranct questionnaire, which recorded student background of education, job, and English experiences; and posttest on writing and speaking.

The main instrument of this research was observation on student’s performance on speaking. Observation was conducted to gather student’s development of speaking starting from the first meeting of the study up to the last time the treatment on classroom action research was employed. Observation was directed to see the developments of grammatical utterances, fluency, accuracy, and vocabulary.

Two instruments used to support the observation included record and field notes. Records were used to see student’s performance in speaking. The results of the records were transcribed and student’s errors of utterances were identified. Field notes were used to identity student’s problems and advantages during the whole class sessions. From the notes, suggestions to improve student’s performance were proposed to motivate students learning.
Other instruments used for this study were interview and questionnaire. Interview was conducted in two ways: the first time the students joined to the class. The questions comprised of background of education, family, motivation, and reasons to choose Active English Course Tenggarong. Informal interviews were given at a whole session of classroom activities, comments and suggestions given in as a part session before the class was over. In order to convince that the questions on interviews were understood and other related information which was not mentioned in the interview was covered, a written questionnaire was given. The questionnaire contained 12 questions designed as a close-ended question.

In order to find the results of the research were accurate and procedural, triangulation were conducted twice.

First, points of activities to be observed, points to be interviewed, and items of questionnaire were checked with the same colleagues at Active English Course who had been teaching conversation. Discussion to select the points was also conducted to the Director of Active English Course Tenggarong.

Second, techniques of teaching, treatments of cycle activities, and results of identifications after the whole sessions of the class over were checked with three components: conversation teacher colleagues, teaching syllabus, and theory on classroom action research. The subjectivity due to involvement of the researcher in the procedures of research was eliminated and more accurate interpretation was achieved. In short, the triangulation was conducted among theory-to-theory, teacher-to-teacher, syllabus to teaching, and vice versa.

Data Collection Procedures

The ultimate objective of the present study is to equip students with functional skills and awareness to express oral English based on given topics ranging from individual, informal, semi formal and formal occasions. To this end, information of psychology of language, topics with low specialized frequency of vocabulary, rules of turn taking in speaking were described well as new vocabulary building and grammar correctness. In order to motivate students express their ideas more freely, fluency was staged to improve however, accuracy and grammar were a little to be ignored. To achieve the objectives, three steps of actions were conducted.

Step 1: Selecting Topics

Topics relevant to arouse student’s psychological barriers, were presented and introduction to the models were given by the instructor. The topics dealt with: personal introduction, education background, family members, hometown, hobbies, jobs, campus. For argumentative story, the topics were changed into: why I choose Active English Course, my reasons to learn English, TV program that I like, and free-choice topics of equal contents. The main aim of presenting these topics was to encourage students to speak freely so that psychological barriers, i.e. ashamed to speak, braveness to express ideas in English, and limited vocabulary and grammar are solved.

Step 2: Developing Individual Confidence

The main aim of stating this step was to encourage student’s confidence to speak English. This further step was considered useful after the psychological barriers were solved and self-confidence to speak was achieved. Two main presentations were given in
this step: providing students with argumentative and semi formal topics but still require individual performance; and to expose students with the native speaker of English.

Argumentative activities were given in terms of dialogue, presenting questions, answering questions, and giving comments on a certain given topics in normal fluency (without written preparation and speaking without pause). To give more real practices, native speakers of English were arrived four times. For this purpose, students without being prepared were motivated to have dialogue with the native speakers of English, identify accurate pronunciation, and ask any questions related to their concerns.

**Step 3: Reflecting Activities**

This step was aimed at motivating students to explore their individual competence and performance in a broader sense. Individually, students had to explain a topic in front of the class, conducting a meeting which involved many persons, giving a speech in front of an audience; and proposing contradiction ideas. This way, each student was given a topic and periodical meeting was given to every student. Focus of attentions was on fluent ideas pertaining with the topics presented, fluency of speaking and interaction with the whole class.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

The data of this research consisted of utterance transcript, results of observation from the whole steps, field note transcriptions, and identification of answers on questionnaire. To make the analysis coherence, results of records, field notes, observations and response of questionnaire were arranged integrated. Relevant evidences were identified and the irrelevant ones were excluded.

In addition, relevant and equal evidences of the same order and concerns of topics were classified. Evidences from the transcribed utterances, results of observations, field notes and responses of questionnaire were inferred.

Finally, tentative conclusion was identified individually with its component. The tentative conclusion was verified using triangulation. After all, triangulation with theory, teacher colleagues, and other concerned sources were used to formulate final conclusion.

**FINDINGS OF THE STUDY AND DISCUSSION**

Upon the completion of the study, three cycles had been established to tackle the problems identified during the research process. As a result, the presentation of the findings in this section is based about the cycles.

**Description of Cycle 1**

**1) Identifying Initial Topics**

The topic focused on this cycle was to encourage subjects to express ideas in order to make individual psychological barriers of the subjects are solved. This session was given for six times of meeting within two weeks. Every subject of the study is to tell in English such the following topics: “introducing oneself, telling about families, telling education background.” As a result, their performance suggested time for preparation, model of telling a topic, problems of limited vocabulary, lacking knowledge on grammar and sentence patterns, and problems of to be ashamed of speaking in different language.

**2) Fact Finding and Analysis**
From the initial speaking performance three categories of findings were observed. First, problems of psychological barriers such as feeling ashamed, feeling reluctant, feeling not confidence were the main factors that made the subjects difficult to express their ideas in English. Second, the subjects had big problems on limited vocabulary and limited knowledge of grammar. Third, subjects were not confident to pronounce some words so that they were afraid of saying ideas. As a result, subjects needed a model, which they were going to utilize as the reference to tell a topic. They needed models to modify grammar, wording, and imitating pronunciation. The following samples are transcribed from the cycle 1.

(1) My efforts to master English, one of destiny of my life. You know, before I would have reach to the master of English, I must learn anything that relation on English.

(2) In fact, I still passive English not active English. I think not enough for communication.

When telling the utterances, subject (1) and subject (2) are confidence enough. However, the structure of the sentences is far from correct and the ideas are not in good orders. The main focus of telling the utterances is, obviously, the points of communication. Above all, realizing to such the problems, this section found out that out of nine subjects of this study, only two subjects spoke more and one spoke only two sentences: “My name is .... I life ....?”

3) Action and Their Findings

The actions and finding were obtained as Step 1, Step 2 and Step 3 were conducted. The results of observation were presented as follow. To attack the problems above models of introducing oneself, telling families, education and alike were presented by the instructor. There were not written preparation presented by the instructor. However, subjects could use written preparation orally. Problems of limited vocabulary, limited knowledge on grammar and psychological barriers were ignored.

Finding of Action in Cycle 2

Findings of cycle 1 were used as the basis for the planning stage of Cycle 2. Aspects that still needed attention were (1) problems of limited vocabulary, (2) problems of grammatical expressions, and (3) problem of afraid of saying in English. This action was conducted for two weeks with six time meetings.

To attack the problems, several points of instructions were introduced. First, focus of expressing ideas was the communication touch. As long as ideas were understandable, there was no problem. Grammatical utterances were ignored as the focus of speaking. Second, limited vocabulary was tentatively solved by using Bahasa Indonesia. If during telling ideas in English, for instance, one got new vocabulary that he did not know, it is suggested to use Bahasa Indonesia and the instructor facilitated him by providing the English words. Third, pronunciation of a word or words that made the subjects were not confident to say was not identified. In addition, focus of expression in English sentence was fluency and voice of telling. Subjects had to try to speak without pauses. Grammatical problems, inappropriate wordings and pronunciations were ignored. As the compensation, clear voice and unstopped sentences were a credit.

Result of observation show that all nine subjects were curious to tell in English. Relying on models presented by the instructor orally, they spoke more bravely under a free individual topic. Three samples of utterances of the subjects are exemplified below.

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Frankly I say that I do not speak English very well. Therefore, I always want to learn English. What did I do? I must study hard first, and often magazines, newspaper, and also speak to my friend.

Based on my duty [on the office], I often face [to the situation] that I have to communicate [by English]. For example [at the last moth] there were some environmental [expert] from West Germany, now Great Germany, [come to my institution and gave us some [training about laboratory] testing.

The first at all. I want to speak English fluently. I think, in globalization era, English is very important. Many people from many different countries will come to Indonesia.

The typical ill from utterances on above samples are the use of preposition (e.g. on the office, by English), agreement to countable nouns (e.g. some expert), verb in relation to its tense (last month expert come), and idiomatic expression (first at all). The ideas and fluency of the utterances have been fairly well achieved.

Other typical ill form utterances were also noted in isolation. The following data were taken from the presentation of the subjects in front of the class as their assignment to have a discussion with the class.

A. (1) We discussion the topic here
(2) I choice; I will choice
(3) We will doing this test
(4) We will mixing
(5) We will held; should we held
(6) We selection
(7) Kanwil must be support this event
(8) Our class will study tour
(9) You have thinking

In line with above concerns, observation on dialogues among subjects was conducted. The elicited ill forms of utterances are stated below.

B. (1) You have thinking
(2) If enough the money
(3) From Surabaya we by train to Bandung
(4) You sure? We can use the house?
(5) We rental two car
(6) Lilik have a grandma
(7) Are you agree with me
(8) When we will doing wedding party?
(9) We will invitation 100 people

As the main objective of this first Conversation Class is to motivate subjects of daring to express ideas in English, illustrations on samples (1), (2), (3) and A, or B are not the focus of the analysis. The main goal of this two-month teaching package is to give enough exposure of English so that subjects are able to speak basic reciprocal English for communication.

Within the action of Cycle 2, the focus of attention is to speak fluently so that ideas can be explored in English. Little attention is given to grammar correction, vocabulary building, and pronunciation in sense that the techniques used to correct the sentences do not destroy the speaking activities.
Finding of Action in Cycle 3

To improve the weakness, action of cycle 3 was conducted. The action was conducted six times within two weeks with various activities focusing on improving the fluency of expressing ideas with self-confidence.

Before subjects were assigned to perform their individual tasks, they were taught oral English through reading, listening, and dictation. As the feedback of these activities, each subject was to paraphrase or summarize the topic directly after the presentation was over. Within the presentation, comments on fluency, accuracy of grammar and pronunciation were provided. Each comment was accompanied by similar illustration taken from different objects.

To develop individual performance, a set of task presented personally in front of the class was given. The topics dealt with: planning a study tours planning a wedding party: having a speech contest. Other presentations were given in written assignment provided three days before. The written topics were grammar containing variety of errors the students usually made.

The results of this action included: three subjects were successful to perform written assignment; and three others were not so successful to discuss the given topic. Within this action, subjects were in high motivation to explain topic in front of the class in English. This implies that the study was successful to make subjects not ashamed to speak English though they had constraints of having limited vocabulary, limited knowledge of grammar and inaccurate pronunciation. Out of nine subjects, seven of them felt more easily to speak English and they were not afraid to say.

The variation program of having dialogue with the native speaker of English contributed valuable findings. Subjects were not afraid to express ideas in English. The beliefs underlying this fact were that the native speaker of English tended to understand any English the subjects delivered; and the native speaker of English did not insult “bad English” the subjects used.

DISCUSSION

As the action research complete, the subjects are in high motivation to speak English. The focus of teaching at early steps, which as aimed at motivating subjects to express in English without paying more attention to limited vocabulary, ungrammatical utterances, and inaccurate pronunciation has been a model that makes the subjects speak English for their own needs and uses.

Teaching which are focused on oral activity and only little attention is given to written activity, such as vocabulary building, review of grammar, and correcting pronunciation, have been a fairly successful model of teaching conversation. Order of topics that should be followed includes individual oral reproduction, interview, interaction with some people, and presentation in front of the audience. To give direct experience with the native speaker, teaching techniques are varied to provide students real dialogue with the native speaker of English and to give exercises thorough listening from tape recorder.

Subject’s mistake in grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation should not be directly commented. This technique will mostly destroy subject’s motivations to speak. Subjects need exposures for some teaching sessions so that they are aware of having mistakes and of ready to correct. The focus of teaching and giving various activities of speaking should be on fluency or expressing communicative ideas. The subjects should also be motivated in order they are not afraid to speak English.
As the focus of teaching is to arouse speaking, attention to grammar and pronunciation is mostly ignored. To solve this problem, further program on Conversation or Speaking Class should be offered. Within this more developed program, focus of teaching is more in term of pronunciation accuracy and grammar correctness.

CONCLUSION

As the conclusion of the study, which is based upon previous description and discussion, the following statements are drawn.

The main ill form of utterances the subjects produced are inaccurate pronunciation that makes the meaning of sentences different. The language aspects incorporated in the ill form of utterance include limited vocabulary, limited knowledge of grammar, and psychological barriers containing feeling ashamed to speak and afraid of making mistakes. Subjects are also confused due to the absence of models they should adopt when they express new or different topics with their own experience. As long as the utterances are communicative, they try to express their ideas without involving much attention on grammar and pronunciation.

With regard to the teaching methods the subjects are expected in line with their goal to learn to speak English. Here, the communicative approach is the ideal method. The teaching process is not formal as in the school classrooms. The instructor should not have home assignment, activities are based on current class situation, and guidance and wise supervision are focused. To this end, instructor should present a good model in both pronunciation and eliciting examples of performance. The medium of class interaction is 80% in English, and the variation of teaching presentation focuses on student-active learning. Formal interaction in discussion or grammar with full of exercise should be avoided. The presence of native speakers of English is also another obvious variation of teaching.

The alternative proposed to overcome the problems are of several points. Initial model of presentation is given if an instructor is going to give a task on speaking activity. Subjects are given exposure and preparation on written forms in order to get ready to start. As the basic starting point is the mastery of oral English, it is necessary to introduce with the subjects, the role of dictionary, phonetic alphabet, reading activity, listening activity, and dictation activity. In the account that the subjects’ grammatical errors are eliminated, review on grammar topics, which support speaking activity is given. Vocabulary building needs to be constantly viewed as the class works.

SUGGESTIONS

In order to improve the results of the teaching of conversation class, the following suggestions are proposed.

In relation with the typical ill form of utterances the students made, this research suggests that subjects’ entry behavior is the main information containing the homogeneity of the students’ level. The typical condition implies that it is difficult to design a single teaching material to be implemented for the class. Institution is suggested to have a placement test in the early stage of teaching. The test is designed to observe initial knowledge of English in both receptive and active, e.g. pre-test is of written and oral test.

The main objective of the subjects to learn oral English in English Course is to communicate orally. It is suggested that the institution implement “the class syllabus design” that rely on students’ need and materials of teaching area explored from the students’ experience and activities. To have this program successful, the instructor should
be ready to use. However, general course outline, which contains topics to be dealt with, schedule of meetings, and kinds of activities, should be firstly acknowledged to all students. The institution is suggested to have formal files for the documents that record students’ typical ill form utterances.

With regard to language aspects that make students difficult to speak, the instructor is suggested have definite plan of teaching, focusing on exposure on grammar, vocabulary building, and pronunciation of accurate words. Teaching techniques must not structure oriented. As it is the class of conversation, exposure of such topics are given through speaking activities.

The teaching methods for tackling the class of conversation should base upon communicative approach. The teacher is suggested focus the class objective on free speaking. Grammatical errors, inaccurate vocabulary and pronunciation might be temporarily ignored. At the stage where students have enough exposure and awareness of their mistakes, correction is given. To suit the teaching method with the overall program, the institution is suggested design the class members of minimum 8 or 10 persons. The length of the time for study is two months, and the teaching frequency is three times a week.

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