

IMPROVING SPEAKING SKILLS THROUGH THE LEARNING COMMUNITY TECHNIQUE

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to find out if there was an improvement in students' English speaking skills through the Learning Community Technique (LCT) than through the conventional way (teacher-centered) of teaching English speaking skills. The subjects of the study were the students in class eleven in a high school in Bireuen, Aceh Province. This study is a collaborative classroom action research project carried out in two cycles, and each cycle was conducted over three meetings. The data was collected using observation sheets, self-assessments of participation in groups, and questionnaires. The findings were then presented after the data was analyzed using qualitative and quantitative data processing procedures. Based on the result of the teacher's observation sheet in cycle 1, there were some aspects of his activities that should be redesigned since he did not conduct the activities fully according to the lesson plan. Based on the result of the data analysis in cycle 1, there were several aspects of the students' activities that were still far from the required standards. Furthermore, the result of the questionnaire on the responses of the students to the implementation of LCT revealed that they had good responses toward its implementation. In addition, they did self-assessment of participation in groups that aimed at evaluating their own progress in learning and how well they performed their tasks.

Key Words: Learning Community Technique, Speaking Skills.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of teaching speaking in English is to train students to be able to express meaningful and contextual communications in English as in real life. Referring to the Competency Based Curriculum (CBC, or *Kurikulum Berbasis Kompetensi* or KBK) in 2004, the standard competency of English for senior high school students is formulated to be able to communicate in oral and written English fluently and accurately in discussions and monologues in the form of narrative, procedure, spoof, recount, report, news item, descriptive, anecdote, exposition, discussion, commentary, and review (Depdiknas, 2003). However, the expectations of the curriculum have not yet become a reality because currently the English teachers appear to spend most of their class time on teaching reading, grammar, and playing games, so that the allocated time for teaching speaking is reduced, approaching only twenty minutes in a week or none at all.

Most of the English teachers avoid teaching speaking. This could be due to several reasons. Firstly, they themselves are not good at speaking English. So what many of them usually do is train the students in drills or have them to answer questions. Secondly, teachers rarely use the media to support the teaching-learning processes. Thirdly, some of them have difficulty in designing/finding activities to make the students participate actively in the processes of teaching-learning speaking. Some of them tend to select materials from a textbook for several reasons. Those who use a textbook repeatedly and follow the sequences in it in each unit may become bored over a period of time.

The result is that most of the senior high school students seem to have great difficulties in speaking English, because of the limitations in class time, lack of confidence, lack of vocabulary, lack of opportunities to speak, lack of motivation, and most importantly lack of practice. They may think the study of English is routine and not interesting. It is believed that they could find it interesting if they were taught differently.

This has been a long-standing dilemma in teaching English, when the students who are expected to learn the language as a skill, but in reality, they learn it as knowledge. This condition can happen for several reasons. First, each class has a large number of students that must be taught at the same time, forcing the teacher to spend much time and energy. Second, the lessons tend to emphasize preparation for the national examinations (called *Ujian Nasional* or UN) which are

commonly conducted in written form. Consequently, the students use most of their times in the classroom doing reading and writing tasks - which is commonly how other subjects like math and science are also taught – then they do not have enough time left over to practice their listening and speaking skills. As a result, they do not master speaking skills, not even for the simplest conversations. It is agreed that the concept of English teaching is not merely to allow the students to generate reading and writing skills, but also to enable them to master the language as a whole, both in spoken and written forms. From another point of view, CBC 2004 seems to lead the junior high school students to be able to interpret the content of various oral texts and respond to them in interactive and interesting activities. Then, they are expected to be proficient in speaking, expressing thoughts and feelings as well as building social relationships in interactive and interesting activities.

In a particular situation, many teachers often found that there are some students who are able to answer a question in a text, but they could not produce a single word when the teacher asked them their reason for choosing that answer. This might not only be because of lack of vocabulary, but rather they do not know how to pronounce the words. They might be nervous due to the situation. According to Slavin (2011:203), this situation indicates that the students need adequate time to do creative activities allowing them to practice their speaking skills.

On a preliminary study conducted by the researcher at SMA Negeri 1 Peulimbang, Bireuen, Aceh Province, he observed some classes in the teaching-learning processes of speaking English. When the teacher asked the students some questions that require oral answers, most of them did not say a single word. Some of them seemed confused and tensed. Some of the confused students admitted that they did not understand what the teacher asked so they did not know how to answer the questions. They were afraid of being punished, laughed at, or looking stupid. Some were nervous, and they gave various reasons of why they felt so. In a class of about 36 students, about six of them were seen to respond easily to the teacher's questions. These were considered as the smartest students in English in the class; in which four of them had taken extra English courses for years.

The situation described above probably partly occurred because of an inappropriate strategy which has often been applied in speaking classes whereby much emphasis has been put on the accuracy of the language. The students were supposed to articulate words properly in

terms of grammar, stress and pronunciation. These requirements generated tension in every chance that they were given to speak; they were very afraid of making mistakes. To avoid this, then, the teacher decided to read a dialogue to the students, asked them to memorize it, and demonstrate it in front of the class. This was actually a good method for giving the students more experience in English. But, as a consequence, the students would only know a little of the language by heart, without knowing when to use the language they have learnt in their daily life.

To make the teaching-learning process more affective, good methods must be used by a teacher. A teacher has many options when choosing a style to teach. A teacher may write a lesson plan of his own, borrow lesson plans from another teacher, or search online, or within books. When deciding what teaching method to use, a teacher will need to consider the background knowledge, environment, and learning goals of the students. Harmer (2001:259) states that:

If teachers have a large variety of techniques and activities that they can use with students they can then apply themselves to the central question of lesson planning: what is it that many students will feel, know or be able to do at the end of the class that they did not feel or know or were not able to do at the beginning of the class. (Harmer, 2001:259)

Considering the environment of the students at SMAN 1 Peulimbang Bireuen, especially in relation to speaking ability and the concepts of teaching-learning speaking proposed by the experts, the Learning Community Technique (LCT) is a technique which is in line with the concept of the Contextual Teaching and Learning approach (CTL). It creates a learning environment that enables the students to speak and share ideas in a group based on the context given. In CTL, the context should be based on the daily life of students. How the students learn from others and the environment to build their own concepts is the key point in LCT with the CTL approach. Here, working in a group or cooperating with others is the core of LCT activities.

By working in a group, students can learn many things from each other. People in a group are so related that one's person knowledge becomes that person's output, and this output is received by another as input (Johnson, 2002:90). Besides, being a good design for a learning

process, LCT can minimize the students' psychological stress when asked to speak. It makes it possible to discover personal strengths and weaknesses. Working together, members of small groups are able to overcome obstacles, to act independently and responsibly, to trust others, to speak up, and to make decisions.

In relation to learning English using LCT, some studies have been conducted using learning groups to improve the speaking performance of students, especially in Aceh (see Syarfuni, 2013). Consequently, the researcher also attempted to solve the students' speaking problems in SMA Negeri 1 Peulimbang. To solve the problems faced by the teacher and students, the researcher was interested in using LCT since this technique provides challenging activities and these activities can be organized to be done by pairs, or by groups. By using classroom action research, it is hoped that LCT can stimulate the students by offering them equal chances to speak, use a variety of speaking activities, and even encourage them to be brave in speaking English.

Research Problems for Study

As explained above, this study aimed at finding ways to improve the performance of the teachers in teaching and to improve the performance of the students' speaking in English. In particular, the researcher formulated four research questions as follows:

1. How can LCT be applied in teaching speaking in English?
2. How does LCT improve the performance of students in speaking English?
3. What were the students' responses towards the implementation of ICT in learning speaking?

The Objectives of the Study

In accordance with the statements above, the objectives of the research are:

1. To describe the implementation of LCT in teaching speaking in English.
2. To find out whether LCT improves the performance of the students in speaking English.
3. To discover the students' responses towards the implementation of ICT in learning speaking.

The Significance of this Study

The findings of this study are expected to provide useful information for English teachers wanting to find appropriate and effective ways of implementing LCT in the teaching-learning process especially for teaching speaking in English. It could also be valuable references for other researchers who are interested in conducting similar research in this field of study.

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

To avoid misunderstandings in this research, the researcher defines some terms used in this research, they are as follows.

Speaking is the human ability to produce sound or voice orally and to share or express feelings and thoughts with others as a means of communication in life using or without any particular gadgets to fulfill human needs and emotions.

In this paper, *speaking in English* is the ability of the second year students at SMAN 1 Peulimbang, Bireuen to master the skills of speaking English.

A *Learning Community* is a technique that can help the students to speak and share ideas by collaboration. In this study, this technique is used to help students work effectively in groups, to help them to understand how they affect others, and to help them communicate with each other.

Classroom Action Research is a research study or observation toward an instructional process organized as actions which are intentionally conducted by the teachers and students in a class in order to test ideas to get better performances by trying new teaching-learning techniques, approaches or strategies.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research was done as a Classroom Action Research (CAR) program in two cycles (Depdikbud, 2002). Each cycle included the following steps.

Planning

In this section, the researcher explained the LCT CAR program, involving: what, why, when, where, who, and how concerning the

actions that were carried out. He did the planning step two weeks before implementing the action.

In CAR, the teacher and the observer were two different persons. That is why CAR is considered a collaborative research which is intended to maintain the objectivity in measuring, valuing, and deciding actions in achieving the best result (Mahaputri, 2013). There should be an agreement between the researcher and the observer when planning an action research. The plan should be implemented together by the researcher who is conducting the action and the observer who is observing the research process. It is aimed at avoiding observation subjectivity and assuring the quality of the research. In implementing the action research, the researcher performed as the teacher while the observer observed the performance of the teacher.

In this planning session, the researcher decided which problem needed special attention. After that, the researcher made the research instruments or tools of observation to record findings and evidence or data during CAR. The activities of this session included the following:

- a. Identifying and analyzing problems - the researcher found that the students' lack of speaking skills in class XI IPS was the major problem for learning English.
- b. Determining reasons - this research was conducted because the researcher found many serious problems, such as students not using English to answer, respond, get or share information with the teacher or with their peers in English. Until they can speak sufficiently well, the teaching and learning process would be handicapped.
- c. Solving the problem - the researcher chose LCT as a possible solution to improve the speaking skills of the students in the class.
- d. Make an action plan - this action plan was used to avoid wasting time in implementing the research actions.

Action

In this section, LCT and the lesson plan for the instructional process were implemented. The steps in the lesson plan included the following:

- 1) Explaining step-by-step the procedures in the instructional processes using the LCT.
- 2) Activities that would be done by the teacher in the instructional processes using LCT.
- 3) Activities that would be done by the students in the instructional processes using LCT.

- 4) The details of the instructional media and procedures for how to use them in the instructional processes using LCT.
- 5) The types of instruments and observations and forms that would be used to collect the information and data for this research.

Observations

This session was conducted along with the implementation of the classroom action research. In this session, the observer conducted the observation and took notes of all that happened and of all things needed for data analysis later on. Data collection was conducted by the observer using the observation checklist forms which were filled in during the instructional processes. The data included the followings: (1) the progress in speaking English by the students in the classroom using LCT, (2) the instructional processes using LCT, (3) the result of students' learning, and (4) the students' learning behavior and responses towards the instructional processes using LCT.

Data collection was both quantitative (scoring the discussions of the student and also using a spoke English test result) and qualitative (the activities of the students, and their comprehension of the learning strategies used by the researcher with the students in the instructional processes for LCT).

Reflection

In this phase, the researcher reflected and contemplated about the performances in the teaching-learning process. It was done in order to have better planning and acting for the next meeting.

Setting and Subject of the Study

This CAR was done with the students at SMAN 1 Peulimbang, Bireuen in the second semester of 2012/2013. The number of the students in the class was 36 students. These students are the subject of the study.

Actually, the reason the researcher chose SMAN 1 Peulimbang, Bireuen as the subject of this research was because the researcher is a teacher at the school. When he taught speaking, he found that these students had difficulties in expressing their ideas in speaking, they felt reluctant to speak, and they were also shy in speaking activities.

Research Instruments

Research instruments play an important role in a research process. They are used to measure, record, and collect empirical data. It should be well-designed in order to produce accurate data. The research instruments used by the researcher in this research were as follows:

Sheet for Observation of Students

To obtain the data about the process of learning and teaching English, especially teaching speaking, the students' observation sheet was administered. The students' observation sheet consists of 12 items or aspects to be observed. The observation sheet was filled out by the observer to see whether the students' activities matched the items provided in the observation sheet or not.

Sheet for Observation of Teacher

To get data about what the teacher did during the action, the sheet for observation of the teacher was used. This included all the teaching steps done by the researcher during the action. It also had 2 columns of category for *Yes* and *No*. The researcher prepared this sheet before the action, and handed it to the collaborator before starting the English speaking class. This sheet was to check whether the teacher followed all the activities written in the sheet or not by ticking on the items.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire is a set of written questions that should be answered by respondents for the collection of information. In this research, the questionnaire was aimed at investigating the responses of the students towards the instructional processes for LCT to enhance the students' speaking skill. This form was given out to the students by the researcher at the beginning and collected at the end of Cycle II (see in the next heading).

Students' Self-Assessment of Participation in Groups

To know how often the students did certain things in their group, the researcher listed some activities on the questionnaire and asked each student to tick the box(es) that best describes what they did. The activities are listed below:

- 1) I listened to others in my group,
- 2) I summarized what others said,

- 3) I asked for information,
- 4) I gave information,
- 5) I gave an opinion,
- 6) I agreed or disagreed, and
- 7) I asked for clarification.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section elaborates on the phases in each cycle, such as: planning, acting, observing, reflecting, evaluating, recommending, and following up.

Cycle I

To observe his performance in the teaching-learning activities, the researcher chose another English teacher as his collaborator. Before the teaching and learning activities were conducted, they discussed the preparations related to the actions in Cycle I. The preparations included the lesson preparation plan, the instructional materials, the instruments and the teaching media. They also discussed the division of students into groups.

Each cycle was conducted over three meetings which focused on the use of group work as the main driver of LCT in the classroom to solve the joint problems faced by the teacher and students in the teaching and learning of speaking. For each meeting, the students were given different materials. To obtain the data, the research instruments via students' and teachers' observation sheets and questionnaires were provided.

When all the preparations were ready to go, the researcher as the teacher implemented the activities that had been designed to use LCT within a CTL approach.

Based on the findings in the first cycle, the researcher became aware that he must not only give the opportunity to speak to certain students, but must ensure that all of them proportionally get the opportunity to speak. Lastly, the researcher must focus on motivating the students. Finally, the researcher and the collaborator agreed to move on to the next cycle and improve the strategy to solve the speaking problems of the students.

From the field notes taken, it can be said generally that the strategy succeeded in building dialogues and discussion between the students.

Although there were still many mistakes in grammar, word choice and pronunciation, still the ideas they expressed could be easily understood.

From reflection and analyses about the problems, the researcher must be more careful in planning the activities to involve all of the students in learning and to finish tasks. During the activity phase, the researcher reminded the students about the aims of group work in learning so that the weaker students would not let the stronger ones finish all the tasks by themselves. The stronger students, on the other hand, were directed to not let the weaker students to just take notes and look on, but make sure that they participated in the discussions as well. Sometimes, the researcher had to point directly to individual students to answer questions, or to perform the tasks assigned.

Cycle II

Cycle II was also conducted over three meetings. As in Cycle I, the planning, implementation, analysis and reflection were also part of this cycle. All activities were designed to follow the model for LCT.

As in the first cycle, reflection was related to the teaching-learning processes which covered the responses of the students to the implementation of activities, and the problems faced in learning through the activities. It was discovered that after being treated with the improved strategy, activities and instructional media, the processes of teaching-learning became better and resulted in improved performances in speaking English by the students.

Most students made some improvement, where 75% of them paid more attention to the explanations by the teacher, they could join in the discussions in the group, they could replace the guided player's role, and they could decide on a role in the role play. About 100% of them could follow the description of the guided player's role, could practice the dialogue for the role play, and could get feedback in English from the teacher. The findings in Cycle II showed that the strength of the application of LCT in teaching speaking could improve the performance of the students in speaking English.

The result of the questionnaire showed that 29 (90%) of the students liked the classroom situation, 32 (97%) could follow the steps when the teacher explained the lesson, 28 (87%) liked the teacher's new way of teaching, 28 (87%) of the students were interested in the topics and the materials, 29 (90%) of them wanted to continue to follow the teaching-learning process using the same kind of techniques, 29 (90%) of the students liked the techniques applied in the classroom,

and 26 (80%) of them liked the media used by the teacher. It can be concluded that most students gave positive responses toward the implementation of LCT.

Before the action program, the students encountered difficulties in speaking English. From the preliminary study, which was conducted prior to the implementation of the actions, it was found that the class was dominated by several high performing students. From 36 students, only six students could respond to the teacher's questions. All these six students belonged to the high performing group of students in the English class.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of this study, in particular the reflections and analysis of the questionnaires from the first and second cycles, it can be concluded that LCT was able to improve the performance of the students in speaking English. The method used made the lessons more interesting and it is highly desirable for an English teacher to make the lessons more interesting.

As teachers, we must be creative in designing and preparing the teaching-learning processes. A teacher should choose an appropriate method, according to the study topic. Based on the findings from this study, LCT can improve the performance of students' speaking in English.

The researcher further suggests that other English teachers should not only focus on teaching reading and grammar, but they should also pay more attention to techniques in teaching speaking by trying out various techniques in teaching speaking in English. Meanwhile, when using LCT, the teacher should make sure that the activities are related to the content of the materials being taught. Based on the experience of this researcher, LCT has been proven to be a productive technique.

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