

IMPROVING STUDENTS' INTERACTION IN SPEAKING CLASS THROUGH INFORMATION GAP ACTIVITIES

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Abstract

The problem dealt with a passive class, where students did not response and avoided interaction with teacher and other students, were tried to be solved. The purpose of the research was to test to what extend the applying information gap activities could improve students' interaction in speaking class. Classroom action research procedures (plan, act, observe and reflection) were used to study the process and participant outcomes.

The participants of this research were the third year students of Building Department of SMKN 1 Padang, consisted of 22 students. One of the English teachers took part in the research as collaborator to assist the implementation of information gap activities and to observe the outcomes.

The research was conducted in two cycles with four meetings for each. The information gap activities were applied at each meeting with different topic of the lesson. In the first cycle, not all of students interacted with the teacher and other friends. Only some of them participated in the class. After analysing the activities in the first cycle, the cycle II followed the reflection on the first cycle to further develop materials, activities and teaching procedures.

The result of the research indicated that the implementation of information gap activities can better improve the students' interaction in speaking class. Student-centered class included pairwork and groupwork also contributed to improve outcomes. Besides, students were active to interact with their teacher and other students. The students participated at all activities. Finally, the classroom action research process itself helped students and teacher reflects on their successes and failures in teaching and learning process.

Keywords: *Speaking, Interaction, Information Gaps Activities*

Introduction

The mastery of speaking skills in English is a priority for EFL students. Students consequently often evaluate their success in language learning as well as the effectiveness of their English class on the basis of how well they feel they have improved in their spoken language proficiency. Related to this, competency based curriculum or curriculum 2004 which

was issued by Ministry of Education reflects the objective of teaching English at vocational senior high school is to develop communicative competence and in order the students to be able to communicate in English orally and writtenly at pre-intermediate level.

In fact, the proficiency in English communication of vocational senior high school students still creates disappointment among the teachers, parents, as well as, the students themselves. The students are structurally competent to produce grammatically correct sentences, but not able to perform a simple communicative task.

A common problem for EFL teacher is dealing with a passive class, where students are unresponsive and avoid interaction with the teacher and other students. This is especially true when a teacher seeks interaction in teacher-class dialog, such as asking question to the class as the whole and expecting at least one student to respond. This can be frustrating for both parties. Students do not answer the teacher's questions even if they understand the question, know the answer, and are able to produce the answer. Furthermore, students can often be very reluctant to give feedback or ask the teacher a question in front of the class.

Based on researcher's observations at the third class of Building department of SMKN I Padang, it was identified that one of teaching learning problems that should be critically improved is the students's interaction in speaking class. The problems were identified as follows: many students become very nervous and embarrassed when asked to speak English. They do not have self-confidence to speak. They are afraid of getting mistakes. They can not arrange the sentences. When the teacher asks questions, nobody responds. They have lack of motivation to practice English either with the English teacher or friends. When the teacher asks them to practice with their friends, they tend to use Indonesian language or they just keep silence.

In the line of above considerations, the problem is formulated as follows: "To what extend information gaps activities can improve students' interaction in speaking class of the third year of SMKN I Padang?"

Teaching Speaking

Some researchers and experts such as Finnochiaro (1997), Burns and Joice (1997) Widowson (1994) have tried to clarify what the speaking is. Speaking is a complex skill in interaction between a speaker and a listener. It involves an active process. A speaker should think idea to express while there are many aspects should be considered such as vocabulary, grammar and situation. According to Widowson (1994) speaking is the active production skill and use oral production. It is capability of someone to communicate orally with others. The one who has skills in speaking can be

identified from his/her ability in using the oral language fluently, clearly and attractively. Moreover, Brown (1994) says that speaking is a skill in producing oral language. It is not only an utterance but also a tool of communication. It occurs when two or more people interact to each other, which aims at maintaining social relationship between them.

Many experts have tried to identify things related to the purposes of teaching speaking. Uhr (1996) said that the single most important reason for teaching speaking is to develop oral fluency that is the ability to express oneself intelligibly, reasonably accurately and without undue hesitation. According to Harmer (1990), the aim of teaching speaking is to train students for communication. Therefore, language activities in speaking class should focus to language use individually. This requires the teacher not only to create a warm and humanistic classroom atmosphere, but also to provide each student to speak.

Richard (2002) clarifies the characteristics of communicative activities that must be applied in teaching speaking. First, *A desire to communicate*. In communicative activity, there must be a reason to communicate, *a communicative purpose*. We also create artificial information gaps by giving different information to pairs of students so that they can have reason to exchange information. Third, *A focus on language content not language forms*. In real life, we do not ask about our friends's family in order to practice "have got" forms. We ask the question because we are interested in the information. Fourth, *Language used variety*. In normal communication, we do not repeatedly language forms. In fact, we usually try to avoid repetition. Fifth, *No teacher intervention*. Teacher intervention in the class communicative activities adds to the artificially. Sixth, *No control or simplification of the materials*. In the class, we often use graded or simplified materials as prompts for communicative activities. These will not be available in the real world.

Lawtie (2004) gives some reasons why teachers teach speaking skills in the classroom. *First*, many students equate being able to speak a language as knowing the language and, therefore, view learning the language as learning how to speak the language. The success of learning language is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the target language. *Second*, speaking is fundamental to human communication. If the goal of teaching language is to enable students to communicate in English, then speaking skills should be taught and practiced in the language classroom.

Related to what activities the EFL teachers do in teaching speaking, some experts such as Nunan (2003) and Kayi (2007). They suggest five principles for teaching. First, be aware of the difference second language and foreign language. Second, give students to practice with fluency and

accuracy. Third, provide opportunities for students to talk by using groupwork and pairwork and limit the teacher's talk. Fourth, we plan speaking task to involve negotiation of meaning. Fifth, design classroom activities that involve guidance and practice in both transactional and interactional speaking.

In the light of suggestions for teaching above, it could be concluded that EFL teachers should pay attention to students' participation and interaction in learning process, apply students-centered in order the students practice a lot in forms of pair work and group work, control students' activities, correct the students' mistakes in good way. Moreover, English teacher should create a classroom environment where students have real life communication, authentic activities and meaningful tasks that promote oral language.

Students' Interaction in the Class

The term "interaction" in the field of language teaching has been defined in a variety of ways. Celce Murcia (1989), for example, defines interaction as a process whereby two or more people engage in reciprocal action. This action may be verbal or non verbal. This idea is supported by Robinson (1994). He says that interaction is the process referring to "face to face" action. It can be either verbal, channelled through written or spoken words or non verbal channelled through touch, proximity, eye contact, facial expression and gesturing. Another definition of interaction is proposed by Couniham (1998) who says that interaction as an activity which involves both social and personal input and forms the basis of vast majority of everyday talking

The kind of interaction in the class has been discussed by many experts. Couniham (1998) divides classroom interaction into two main types. First, teachers's talk. (Usually in form of a question, or a request to practice a structure). Second, students' talk (usually a straight answer to the questions posed by a teacher or drill type operation which sees the students inserting his own information into the gaps provided). Both of them are evidences of verbal exchange.

Moreover, Stoller (2003) says that there are four specific concerns of teachers in classroom interaction. They are teacher-student interaction, student-student interaction, students' participation and amount of teacher talk..

Educationalists believe that interactions between students and teacher are fundamental of the learning process..In order to have successful teacher-students interaction, there are three conditions that the teacher creates:

- a. Students should feel free to ask questions to the teacher and their peers.

- b. Students should feel free to answer questions.
- c. Students should not feel threatened by giving an incorrect response.

Viewed from students' opinions about teacher-students interaction, Dong (2004) says that the most students put forward their suggestions for improving classroom teacher students' interaction. Their ideas could be reduced into three points:

- a. Teacher should give them more chance to speak in the class.
- b. Various classroom activities were welcomed.
- c. Teacher should give every student equal opportunities to express themselves, especially pay attention to those introverted students

EFL teachers are understandably interested in maximizing students' opportunities to speak during classroom interaction and research in language acquisition has demonstrated the potential benefits of student-student interaction (Knutson, 2001). Howard (2001) supports Knutson's ideas; he clarifies some reasons why student-student interaction is desirable in teaching speaking:

1. *Participation*. Most people agree that learning anything involves participation. It is difficult to learn language without engaging with that language.
2. *Maximizing practice time*. Learners need to practise as much as possible if they are to be successful. Interaction through pair and group work maximizes the opportunities to practise as more learners speak for more of the time.
3. *Collaboration*. Collaborative learning, particularly through the use of collaborative tasks, has been shown to foster language development since learners can see a reason to use language in order to interact.
4. *Socialisation*. Related to the concept of collaboration is that socialisation. Interaction does not only promote language development but it also fosters the development of social skills.
5. *Motivation*. Motivation is a fundamental aspect of successful learning. Interaction gives learners the opportunity to use language successfully and to measure their progress which in turn should lead to increase in motivation.

In communicative classroom, teacher talking time must be kept to a minimum and students' talk time must be maximized. EFL teachers might have felt that they spent a considerable amount of time doing the talking and encouraging the students to participate rather than listening to the students and helping them to cope with their weaknesses (Abarca, 2001).

Some researchers state the importance of students' interaction in the teaching learning process. Garrison (1990) and Oliver & McLoughlin (1997) say that it has been found that students who interacted regularly with their instructor and with other students were more motivated and had better

learning experiences. Moreover, Englander (2002) says that emphasized interaction among the students can enhance them to use the language. It is good way to develop students' speaking skills. Ihsan (2003) supports the above ideas. Based on his research in English teaching, he found that the most students seemed to like and enjoy the activity as there was a lot of interaction among them.

From many views about the students's interaction above, we can conclude that being able to interact in a language is essential. Therefore, English teacher should provide learners with opportunities for meaningful communicative behaviour about relevant topic by using learner-learner interaction as the key to the teaching language for communication. It is crucial that teachers plan ways of enabling students to understand and use more target language in classroom interaction. Teacher should design the activity with the modified interaction (tasks) so that the learners can naturally acquire language through the conversational interaction.

Information Gap Activities

Information gap activities have increasingly achieved popularity in recent years and have been recommended as a way forward in English language teaching. Various influential experts such as Harmer (1991), Raptou (2002), and Kayi (2007). Information gap activities are communication exercises in which each of two paired students has information which they must orally relate to each other in order to fill in the "gaps" in the information they have. The students are asked to work in pairs. Then the teacher distributes the dialogue, pictures or forms in which they have different missing information. The students are asked to question and answer based on information on his/her paper. The pair will respond based on their own paper.

The ideas of applying the information gap activities appeared because of four reasons (Liao, 2001). First, traditional classroom speaking practice often takes the form of drills in which one person asks a question and another gives an answer. This question and answer are structured and predictable and often there is only one correct answer. Second, in all to many classes teacher pupil exchanges have little communicative value because there is no real information being exchanged. Third, traditional grammar oriented class, teacher often spends a large proportion of class time asking questions for which they and the students already know the answer. Fourth, teacher asks a "display question" that is a question the teacher knows the answer to an individual students answers, the teacher evaluates or directly corrects the answer and then the cycle begins again with another student and another question that everyone knows the answer to. It is an unrealistic use of language.

The kind of activities which could be done by the teacher in the class, Basturkmen (1994) proposes three types activities as follows: First, Partial texts: the students have to fulfill the incomplete plans, diagrams, and forms. Second, Jigsaw stories: with each student in the pair/group seeing, reading, or hearing a different part. Third, Gapped information grid; Having given out the incomplete material, the teacher requires the students to complete it by asking each other question and/or relating their own information. Zhang (2004) proposes some strategies to be applied in teaching such as: pairwork and groupwork, personalization, interest, variety and open ending.

Some experts have discussed the advantages of applying information gaps activities in teaching speaking. Hess (2001) says that information gap activities can provide a comprehensive feedback from the learners, such as a wide diversity of opinions, references, and values, many different experiences and styles of learning. Then, he also adds that information gap activities can foster a learner-autonomous learning style

Liao (2001) clarifies that information gap activities give students opportunities to use English inside or outside the class. They also have the genuine communicative value. Besides, Doughty and Pica as quoted by Liao (2001) information gap activities can promote real communication and facilitate language acquisition. Raptou (2002) says that information gap activities can also reinforce vocabulary and a variety of grammatical structures taught in the class.

Viewed from teachers' preparation before teaching, Rees (2002) says that by keeping the notion of a gap between students in mind, it is easy to come up with speaking activities often require very little preparation but can increase the total amount of student talking time in any lesson.

According to Zhang (2004) information gap activities collect views not only from others but also from one's own contributions as well. It is both speakers' conceptions that close the gap between them. Personalization activities provide the learners opportunities to express their opinions, suggestions, or taste, to share their real life experiences or ideas, and to apply this issues or concerns to some controversial issues. Then, he says that individualization activities allow the learners to act at their own pace, in their own manner and style, and on the topics or content of their own choice. These certainly assist the learners in fostering an intrinsic motivation and an attitude: a desire to invest effort in the learning for its own sake.

Research also suggests that the presence of information gap activities is beneficial both in teacher-student exchanges and student-student interaction in from of pairwork and groupwork. Kayi (2005) says that in information gaps activities, students are supposed to be working in pairs or in groups. One student will have the information that other partner does not

have and the partner will share their information. Furthermore, he adds that information gaps activities serve many purposes such as solving problem or collecting information. Also, each partner plays an important role because the task can not be completed if the partners do not provide the information the others need. These activities are effective because everybody has the opportunity to talk extensively in the target language.

To sum up, information gaps activities will give valuable contributions to the both students and teacher. In part of students, these activities will have a chance to speak with their partner and exchange ideas. The students will have reasons to interact with their partners or classmates because they have to complete the communicative task.

Previous studies have generally positive effects of information gap activities for students. Basturkmen (1994) said that is not only a more satisfying role for the learners but also promoting authentic language use in the class. Raptou (2002) did a research in using information gap activities in teaching French. He found that the students were all happy to do the activity because it was fun and they knew that it was helping them to increase their confidence in speaking French Rosmaliwarnis (2007) Her study showed that students who were taught through information gap activities had better speaking skill. They can motivate the students to speak because they can be free to respond the missing information without memorizing the dialogue.

The review of related literature and related findings above showed that since the purpose of teaching speaking is communicative efficiency, it is essential that students should be given opportunity to practice communicating. The classroom should be the learners' centred. Teacher's role is to facilitate students' communication. When providing speaking practice in the classroom, we need to ensure that students have motivation to speak and some information or ideas to exchange. Creating or exploiting information gap can provide reasons to speak or to interact. To sum up, information gap activities are effective means to create the students' interaction and to develop the students' speaking skills.

Findings and Discussion

First cycle

To improve the students' interaction in the speaking class, the information gap activities were then implemented throughout the third class of building department. In this research, other English teacher involved as a collaborator. The main activities were implementing information gap activities, observing the class, planning lesson, and interviewing. Throughout the cycle, in every topic of the lesson, information gap activities were gradually introduced and practiced, starting from guided to free practices

In the first cycle, the scenario of teaching was not well organized yet. Some students were still unparticipated and uninterested in practicing the information gap activities. Some of them were still passive. Some of students did not want to interact. After analyzing on the outcomes and the result of observation checklist, interview and questionnaire in the first cycle, five topics were identified as the serious problem of applying the information gap activities in the first cycle and as needing some changes or improvements. The problems are: First, the students often spoke in Indonesian language when they were practicing in pairs/group work. Second, one student would dominate activities especially in pair work activities without giving chances to their friends to ask questions. Third, students could not interact cause lack of vocabularies, not knowing of how to pronounce the words correctly. Fourth, students were not clear about how to go through an activity. Teacher's instructions are not clear enough for students. Fifth; some students were simply uninterested in working with others. To do the task, they tend to look at their friend's paper without asking questions.

Second Cycle

Based on the evaluation and reflection in the previous cycle, the activities in the second cycle were focused on the following activities: First, giving clear instruction. Second, improving explanation of vocabulary. Third, the changing of the classroom structure. Fourth, avoiding using Indonesian language while they are practicing. Fifth, timing of classes to ensure collaborator can attend.

During the two cycles, an interaction occurred between a teacher and student, the teacher and the whole class, a student and another student. The observation revealed that the classroom interactions in the class were varied. Teacherstudent interaction happened when the teacher explained the lesson, gave instructions and during the supervision of students' work.

While learning, students gradually decreased dependence on the teacher and some of them further developed as autonomous learners. They started to reflect on their goals setting tried to reach it through information gap activities. In the classroom interaction, students were brave enough to interact to both teacher and their friends. This means that students' confidence in language learning especially speaking increased. The atmosphere of the class at that time, was positive because the tried to give positive feedback to help the students. In short, students learned most when they interacted.

The improvement of students' interaction was confirmed by the result of the analysis of observation, questionnaires and interview. Almost all of students stated that through information gap activities, they were

gradually improving their interaction in the class, as well as their participation in learning.

The comparison of observation, questionnaire and interview result of first cycle and second cycle were discussed as follows:

1. Teacher-Student Interaction

The students enjoyed the activities and they even tried to create their own dialogues with the teacher. The teacher monitored the activity by walking around the class to check on the progress. The class atmosphere had changed dramatically. Now the students were relaxed and communicate with one another. The students answered most of teacher's questions with enthusiasm, and even asked their own questions. The class atmosphere was conducive to learning.

2. Student-Student Interaction

The observation showed that student-student interaction occurred in some contexts such as in pair work and group work activities. The students were eager to interact with each other in these activities. These activities enabled them to listen, imitate, express an idea, ask questions and even correct their friend's mistakes. These conditions empowered the students to develop their English communication abilities.

In order to elicit information and opinions from their friends, the students needed to interact among themselves. They should spend most of the time working in pairs or groups. When they were interacting in group, the students stood up and each found someone to ask their questions to. They took turns asking and answering questions to their partners and classmates. Then, they should find and meet other friends and the process repeats. They enjoy participating and sharing ideas. The fear of speaking was naturally away. Students needed to know that their values and ideas are important and they should not hesitate to express their ideas. By doing so, the students became active participants in the classroom. This participation empowered students to open their minds to new ideas and they will be able to construct meaning to the language learning experiences.

Moreover, student-student interaction fosters confidence because it allows students to talk freely without any authority judging their ideas (Tsui, 1996). The data gathered through questionnaires, interview and observation, support this, as the most of students enjoyed working in pairs/groups and appeared to have been active participants who listened to each other. A more student-atmosphere in the class encouraged students to participate more effectively and increased positive attitude and greater motivation to speak.

3. Students' Participation

There was an increasing in the students' participation in the class. The comparison of the questionnaire result of first and second cycle showed that

students have already made a change in their attitudes toward learning English. It was confirmed that the students were having fun and enjoyed participating. Moreover, they could learn from each other.

4. Teacher Talking Time

Teacher talk is a special communicative activity. Its goal is to communicate with students and develops students' language proficiency. During the two cycles, the teacher was reduced. Teacher talked when he explained the lesson, gave instructions and showed the models. Meanwhile, it maximized the students' talk.

Moreover, the data from questionnaires, observation checklist and interview showed that students' interaction in speaking class improved. The students have been brave to ask questions to the teacher if they get problems with the instructions and vocabularies and to answer the teachers' question. The students tried to interact with their classmates. Almost of students participated in learning. The role of the teacher as prompter; walked around the class, joined in with the students, made suggestions and prompted the learners with information they have forgotten, as the facilitator; to facilitate students to speak and to prepare the authentic materials. By doing above activities, the teacher talking time decreased, the students' talking time increased. The students had a lot of time to practice English in the class.

The result also revealed that learning English involving information gap activities was preferred by students. The students had more opportunities to ask and answer questions, to practice the language being learned without a psychological burden. These findings strongly supports other recent studies that information gap is important for creating students interaction in the class. The students were all happy to do the activity because it was fun and because they knew that it was helping them to increase their confidence in speaking. It also increased their motivation and make efforts to keep speaking not only to the teacher but also the other students (Raptou, 2002). This finding challenges English teachers to apply and create classroom activities that require learners to interact to the teacher and their friends.

Closing

This classroom action research discovered that the implementation of information gap activities in speaking class helped the students improve their interaction. Despite the difficulties in the first cycle, due to the unfamiliarity with the information gap activities, the lack of motivation, lack of vocabularies, and avoid interacting with the teacher and other students, almost of all the students then actively involved in the class. The problems found in speaking class; dealt with a passive class, where the

students were unresponsive and avoid interaction with the teacher and other students have been solved through implementation of information gap activities.

After applying information gap activities in speaking class for eight meetings in two cycles, it can be concluded:

1. Information gap activities can better improve the students' interaction with the teacher and other students. When they were practicing in pairwork and groupwork, all of them participated. It meant that students' participation in the class also improved. On the other hand, they decreased the amount of teacher talking time.
2. Information gap activities can maximize students' opportunities to speak during the English lesson and provided the potential benefits of student-student interaction. In order to elicit information and opinions from the teacher and friends, the students needed to interact among them. They should spend most of the time working in pairs and group. The students have reasons to interact and tasks to fulfill.
3. Information gap activities encourage students' practice opportunities of the target language receptivity in the lessons as a result of presenting various tasks. In the light of students' reflections for the tasks used during the study, which were very positive, it showed that students were receptive to the idea of information gap activities while learning English.

Translating all the ideas of the findings into the framework of improvement, all language teachers are invited to become familiar with information gap activities which are a very popular and adaptable framework in communicative language teaching. When adopting this framework, language teachers should provide their students with a variety of enjoyable tasks.

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