PROMOTING ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS: LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE EFL CLASSROOMS CONTEXT

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Abstract:

As they are candidate of school English teachers in Indonesian schools, graduates of English education programs in Indonesia are expected to demonstrate adequate understanding of English pedagogical knowledge and uses. Yet, it is widely acknowledged that during their language and teaching training, many of these teacher candidates often experience various challenges, particularly in the domain of English-speaking skills. This paper, therefore, sought to explore how teacher educators (TEs) attempted to deal with such challenges in their teaching praxis. Drawing on a qualitative research approach, data were collected from TEs working in a university in the north part of Indonesia who were selected purposively, and classroom observation field-notes. Findings revealed two major themes, designing classroom tasks and promoting group work, which highlights the need to create a fun and stimulating classroom atmosphere for the TEs to foster improvement in English speaking skills.

Keywords: games, group work, teacher educator, English speaking skills

1. Introduction

Despite the fact that English is yet a second language in Indonesia, a language status which renders a politically and socio-culturally use of another language in wider aspects of life, many Indonesian learners put so much effort to master the language. A commonly held belief for this endeavour is that being proficient in English opens worldwide access, such as pursuing higher education overseas and securing position in today's competitive job market. Other reason is that teaching this language has been mandated for years in the country's educational curriculum. That is why, learning this language as a subject matter begins earlier in primary education (Panggabean, 2015), and continues until higher education in pursue of improved English proficiency level for internationally related gains. Unfortunately, research in English language teaching arena have shown

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unsatisfactory results for learning this foreign language (Abid, 2016; Nur & Madkur, 2014).

It is claimed that, in many parts of Indonesia, high school students, in particular, are not fully able to perform as competent users of the language they have been learning for years in many given contexts. Prolonged engagement in the language tuition, apparently, does not always lead to successful language learning and uses. Consequently, as they continue studying in universities, these highs school graduates encounter more demanding tasks related to English learning (Zein, 2014), which is partly due to their insufficiently prepared English classes during schools. For some university students these might not be a real problem, but for English majors are.

In Indonesia, the context of the present study, students majoring in English Education will be at the frontline to many schools in the country in a way that these students are qualified candidates of the school English teachers upon graduation. As such, expectation overqualified English teacher candidates undoubtedly persists, and there is no reason for the graduates for not being able to perform acceptable standard of teaching and using the language. To respond to this need, a myriad of efforts has been enacted, particularly in the classroom settings, by both the government, educational practitioners and classroom teachers.

Nevertheless, relatively little is understood about how Indonesian English TEs deal with multifaceted issues arising out of their classroom praxis, such as having a large number of learners, limited teaching hours allocated for English tuition, lack of stimulating pedagogical resources as well as teachers varied English proficiency level. Therefore, this present study aims at exploring how TEs at the university level, regardless of these issues, enact their English teaching practices in response to the need to foster English communicative skills amidst their linguistically and socio-culturally different students. By listening to their teaching experiences, particularly how they overcome their perceived teaching challenges, teacher education institutions may reflect on current teaching phenomena and develop strategic plan for ensuring qualified and competent school English teachers can be facilitated.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Context to the study
English in Indonesia, to some extent, is taught as a foreign language subject across classrooms. This language tuition begins from primary school to the higher education level. To meet the need of English teachers at this school level, candidates for schoolteacher position are usually recruited from teacher education institutions, or university graduates who can satisfy the required criteria for teaching practices. One of these teacher education institutions is the institution where the present study was conducted. This institution, located in the north part of Indonesia, is a government-run university, aiming to educate qualified and competent school teachers in Indonesia. The courses offered, among others, are science, economics, businesses, engineering, primary

education, and English education. The programs include bachelor, master's and doctoral degree.

English education course in this institution is administered by Faculty of Letters and Culture. This program seeks to educate high school graduates who want to purse career in the teaching English sector across primary and secondary schools in Indonesia. The normal duration for completing this course is within four years, comprising eight semesters. This is a full study program, with writing bachelor thesis included into the main component for graduation assessed by a board of examiners assigned by the faculty. With regards to teaching staff, this English education course has staff graduating from Indonesian and overseas universities, with some holding doctoral degree and professor qualifications. The students, henceforth refer to English majors (EMs), are high school graduates from Gorontalo and the surrounding regions. Upon acceptance into this program, these EMs are assigned to enroll into an Intensive Course unit where they learn all skills of the English language, weighing 12 credits.

2.2 Using games and group work in EFL classrooms

Games and group work are seen as useful activities, particularly in language classrooms. As with games, according to Uberman (1998), teacher can adopt games to complement their primary classrooms activities, either in the beginning or at the end of a lesson. One of the reasons for integrating games into the classroom is that games can reinforce learning of a particular aspect of language while fostering whole class participation. Lengeling and Malarcher (1997) asserts that by using games, teachers can facilitate improvements in learners' cognitive aspects, such as encouraging learners to practice using the language being learnt in the classroom situation. In addition, when teacher can effectively integrate games in their teaching praxis, learners can find ways to reduce their anxiety level whilst attempting to build on positive feelings in their learning (Crookal, 1990).

Studies about the use of games in language classroom has been extensively done, especially in pursue of anticipating challenges in the speaking domain. Wu, Chen, and Huang (2014), for example, examined how digital board games uses were related to communication skills and intrinsic motivation in the context of Taiwan. The study showed that many of the students engaged in the digital board games classroom reported that they felt comfortable in speaking English. These findings were supported by Vardanjani (2014), who measured the impact and results of adopting language games into vocabulary learning class in Iran. Vardanjani found that students in the experimental group showed improvement related to vocabulary learning, and the games uses provide the students with an interesting and stimulating learning vibrance.

Other similar findings were from Liu and Chu (2010). These researchers sought to examine how particular ubiquitous games impacted on Taiwanese English learners' learning motivation and achievement. The study found that the use of games in the English language classroom assisted the students in obtaining better learning outcomes and increasing their motivation to learn English. It was also reported in the study that

students said that they felt satisfied with the ubiquitous games as the games encouraged them to interact orally in English in everyday life context.

With regard to group work, the literature show that other ELT teachers prefer group work to using games to deal with particular problems in their classrooms. For example, Huong (2007) investigated the function of pair and how drills in the context of ELT can vary according to a peer's level of ability in Vietnam English classrooms. The study revealed that the assisted group outweighed the unassisted in terms of language performance. The group, which was scaffolded by a more proficient peer, encouraged all the members of the group to equally participate in speaking in the target language, minimising L1 uses, which was more noticeable in the discussion within the group of unassisted members. In a similar vein, a study by Kayi-Aydar (2013) found that group work would work effectively during students-teacher interaction in various classroom activities, as in small group power struggles amongst students often interfere. Drawing on a study conducted in an English as a second language (ESL), Kayi-Aydar (2013) suggested that what is crucial is how teachers encourage students to seek support from peers and to learn from 'scaffolded talk' for their oral English proficiency progress.

These studies have described how teachers and learners communicate in English during classroom activities. Using games and group work assisted language learners in learning English in a fun and stimulating learning environment. Yet, to what extent these two teaching strategies are enacted in teacher education program remains under-explored. Given this, this present study sought to fill this void.

3. Research Methods

The study reported in this article, which is part of a larger study conducted in a teacher education institution in Indonesia by Abid (2016), was informed by a qualitative research approach. This approach suggests collecting research data by listening to how research participants make meaning of their lived experience in a natural setting (Creswell, 2012). Such lived experience resembles the voices of EFL teacher educators in adopting particular strategies for an engaging and stimulating English classroom. Given this, eleven EFL teacher educators who were teaching English at a teacher education institution in a province in Indonesia agreed to share their pedagogical experience. They were asked to fill in informed consents and were told that their participation in this present study was voluntarily, which means they could withdraw from the research at any time.

A semi structured interview technique was carried out with the TEs in a language (the Indonesian language or English) that they most preferred. Prior to conducting the interview, a pilot study was carried out to examine whether or not the interview questions addressed the purpose of the study. Furthermore, revision was done to improve the quality and relevance of the interview question to the research purpose, as well as the interview procedures. Following this, the interview transcriptions were transcribed verbatim, and analysed using a thematic analysis method. To ensure trustworthiness of the study, all participants were asked to double check the interview

transcripts to see if these were what they actually meant during the interview. In addition, secondary data were used, which were observation fieldnotes on some of the TEs classrooms.

The key question, therefore, addressed in this present study was: *How do teacher educators deal with EMs' English-speaking challenges in English language classroom?*

4. Results and Discussion

Findings revealed that there were two main themes which best described how teacher educators (TEs) dealt with English majors (EMs) English speaking challenges. These were designing classroom tasks and promoting group work.

4.1 Designing classroom tasks

TEs saw Games and Show and Tell activity as beneficial in handling particular difficulties related to students' involvement in classroom activities. TE1, for instance, to encourage her EMs to speak English, she would ask her EMs to play games, either in groups or pairs. In addition, she adopted games to observe the progress of her EMs' English-speaking skills and to stimulate less proficient EMs to speak English. To do this, this TE drew on group or pair work, where EMs could assist their low proficient peers to deal with particular English-speaking problems they might face:

> *"So, I have so many ways how to attract the lower students to be involved in activities. So I have just like making groups, do in pairs. We do a lot of games. So sometimes we have method in teaching but then while doing that we should see their progress by giving them activities and the activities one of them is gaming".*(TE1: 68)

Similarly, TE9 looked at games as a suitable option to encourage EMs to participate actively in classroom English speaking . She believed that Talking Stick could stimulate EMs to speak up and communicate with their peers:

> *"In order to help students, become interested or to make them interact effectively in the classroom, I use Talking Stick. So, students take turns in speaking before their peers".* (Researcher's translation, TE9: 63)

Other TEs, meanwhile, looked at the Show and Tell activity as an option to a game. As TE2 put it:

> *"So, they will bring a thing that they thought that it is favorable or adorable or something like that, but they don't have to show to their friends before the class started. So, when they perform the class, they will show it surprisingly then they will explain why they took this thing".* (TE2: 31)

In this activity, the EMs were asked to talk about items that they liked. They were guided to hone skills in delivering oral presentation. The following section describe other theme, namely, promoting group work.

4.2 Promoting group work

Group work, for the purpose of the present study, refer to classroom tasks that entails two or more students working collaboratively in and out of the classroom. In the present study, some TEs detailed that they utilised group work to stimulate the EMs to speak in English. For instance, TE4 said that working with peers opened up opportunity to develop confidence level when speaking English. This TE perceived that for English beginner level learners to speak English, speaking with peers could create a more secured and enjoyable speaking atmosphere than with TEs:

"So, for example if they choose the theme best friend, two of them will work together. … So this is, you know, in my understanding that we can accommodate their worry about to how to speak English in, you know, in the first time by themselves in their beginning level like that". (TE4: 3)

TE2 maintained that when engaging in group work, EMs help to share classroom activities based on what interested them and what level of proficiency they were. She said that her EMs would take on different parts of the group activity on the basis of their current English proficiency level:

"Not really but because they work in groups so other students will fill it. So, they usually share tasks, 'Oh I will do the opening' but this does not mean that he or she does not know the content … . "(TE2: 33)

Likewise, TE8 who was a listening teacher educator, contended that working in group assisted the EMs in the listening classes, which further facilitated their English-speaking skills improvement. This TE perceived that when engaging in group work, EMs had a chance to recognise which aspect of their learning that should be improved:

"Usually they found difficulties. But if they do it in groups, they can ask each other. So, they will know what is his or her … what is it? Lack or maybe what is? Weaknesses from the audio so they can collect their group's opinion and then write down the answer". (TE8: 43)

Furthermore, observations in some of the TEs' speaking and listening classes were conducted to corroborate findings from the interviews. The field-notes below, which were obtained from TE8 and TE3's classes show the organization of working in groups for promoting dialogue in English.

"There were about 22 students attending today's class. They were seating in the computer laboratory. The lecturer asked them to match story in the diary with the story they heard from the recording. In groups, the students completed the task. Initially, they looked for the answers individually, then they shared and compared the answers with their group members". (TE8's class, 12M14)

"The topic for today's lesson was giving direction. After explaining some useful expressions about giving direction, the lecturer put the students in groups. The students were asked to play a game. They must help one member of their group to get to a particular place by giving direction". (TE3's class, 12M14)

These participating TEs reported that to stimulate low English proficient EMs to speak English when interacting orally during classroom activities, they would need to make use of a variety of classroom tasks, such as games and Show and Tell activities. By using games, for instance, the TEs expected the EMs to talk in English. According to Avinash (2016), adopting language games facilitates the learning language and stimulate learners to find ways to learn. Likewise, Liu and Chu (2010) who found that using a ubiquitous game, such as HELLO (the Handheld English Language Learning Organization), offered opportunities for Taiwanese students learning English to take part in meaningful and stimulating classroom activities that helped them in speaking and listening. However, the procedures enacted and how they operate in these two classroom settings are not the same. For example, HELLO is a modern game that entails different learning strategies to encourage learners to speak up (Liu & Chu, 2010). Talking Stick, on the other hand, has relatively simple procedure where EMs talk about topic of their interest in turn.

What is different between the games adopted in the two classroom settings above is their interactivity level. Whilst HELLO allows learners to practise speaking in a real context (Liu & Chu, 2010), the Talking Stick or the Show and Tell, on the other hand, emphasises on individual speaking skills, where interactive speaking activities that reflect communication in real life has minor part. In addition, in the Talking Stick activity, EMs with adequate level of speaking ability might see speaking before their peers as less anxious, but EMs who are low proficient speakers may not. For these EMs, involving in the Talking Stick activity might cause them anxious because of their lack of linguistic competence. On the contrary, the HELLO game enables the participating students to take part in different classroom activities where genuine communication is present. In fact, through playing this game, students gain confidence when talking in English with a virtual learning instructor and obtain useful feedback (Liu & Chu, 2010). However, all these do not imply that the EMs and the TEs lack the ability to deal with 'sophistication' in adopting classroom technology.

Another kind of strategy that the TEs adopted in the classroom for handling the communication challenges is promoting group work, seeking to stimulate EMs to be confident and to talk in English. According to Anwar (2016, p. 228), group work enables learners to be familiar with "*the habit of sharing, arguing and presenting ideas in pairs or to*

other limited members". Yet, there are claims pointing out that group work in language classroom can be ineffective because learners became less responsive to their peers due to some reasons (Kayi-Aydar, 2013), such as the effects of power distance among the group members. This, of course, does not demote the advantages of group work as there might be cultural or contextual issues interference. What this suggests though is TEs need to be thoughtful about how group work operate in order to bring about effective outcomes for the learners (Anwar, 2016).

5. Recommendations

Given that the EMs will eventually be English language teachers, it is crucial that they continuously upgrade their knowledge about different types of classroom activities, such as how to use digital games to facilitate English speaking skills improvement. This consideration emphasises on the fact that the EMs must be treated as a participant in the game and the facilitator of the game for their future English language classes. With regard to promoting group work, Mercieca (2014) asserts, TEs need to make sure that when engaging in group work students remain socially and culturally connected. This, in particular, helps learners with low English proficiency level gain confidence when speaking as they feel secured and comfortable working with their peers who are socially and culturally related. Given this, the role of TEs play a significant part here. If this is addressed effectively, language learners may have the chances to make the most of using L2 and to hone skills that they can utilise to anticipate particular drawbacks arising out of working in groups, for example, "*disagreement among group members*" (Gillies, 2016; Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

6. Conclusion

Overall, the findings of the present study, suggested that the TE's consider designing classroom activities by, for instance, adopting games, and promoting group work as useful options that help EMs find ways to improve their English-speaking skills. These TEs are aware of the fact their EMs demonstrate different level of English proficiency and that speaking in English for some EMs might increase anxiety level, thus, compromise effective L2 learning. Given this, the TEs need to ensure that their teaching practices entail creating a stress-free classroom activities which facilitate L2 learning and improvement in the domain of English speaking skills. This will also create chances for the EMs to manage their own learning and to choose the most appropriate actions for their learning (Griffiths, 2015). The present study, however, lack information about how EMs respond to TEs' strategies in handling with their perceived English-speaking challenges as well as adequate data from the observation field notes. Future studies on this potential area of investigation might add useful insights into how English-speaking skills are facilitated across language classrooms in the context of teacher education programs.

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