

INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING FOR STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILL IMPROVEMENT: VOICES AND REALITIES FROM THE GROUND

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ABSTRACT

To improve the students' speaking proficiency is one of key focuses in EFL teaching. However, most students at intensive English (IE) program administered by the Language Center in the University of MI (pseudonym), one of state universities in Malang, still encounter several major problems in speaking English such as that they do not know what to say, they frequently get stuck, or they have such high levels of anxiety. These contribute much to the students' limited speaking competence. Therefore, the current paper examines teaching and learning practice in IE program which focuses on speaking and listening skills and aims at formulating the appropriate implementation of inquiry-based learning to improve the students' speaking skills. The data were collected through oral presentation test, questionnaire, field-notes, and interview. The criteria of success are that (1) every student gets a minimum score of 70, and (2) 75% of the class has positive attitude toward the strategy. The findings of the study revealed that the strategy could indeed improve the students' speaking skill. In addition, it could increase their self-esteem as well as encouraged them to involve more in the learning processes. Such values might be gained when the strategy takes the steps which facilitate the students to: (1) *respond* several guiding questions which stimulate investigation; (2) *investigate* some texts, real objects, pictures, or persons to gather the required information; (3) *create* new ideas by discussing the information with peers; (4) *present* the ideas in front of the class; and (5) *reflect* on their own performance.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid spread of English across the globe has located the English language as a demanding skill with rosy hopes of liberating socioeconomically disadvantaged people in the periphery. Thus, English language teaching in non-English speaking countries has mushroomed, even unlikely to stop

growing, given that English is viewed as an essential universal skill that people should learn to catch up with 'modernization'. Among other skills, speaking seems to be the most basic proficiency that should be mastered for its potential convertibility as a communicative competence necessary in the most human spectrum, for example, in education, social, economy, and politic. Fromkin, Blair, and Collin (2001) contended that speaking is a fundamental part of any language learning. ELT should therefore invest a lot in improving students' speaking proficiency since English language learners, in particular, are expected to express ideas through 'fluent' oral language performance.

Nonetheless, speaking also seems to be a monster to EFL learners, which often hinder their successful language learning. Many EFL students encounter severe learning problems as they often do not have insufficient knowledge about the topic to speak, high levels of anxiety to speak in English, and limited vocabulary (Bakar, Noordin, & Razali, 2019). Without this, the students are unable to use the language and build comprehensible communication. Finally, some students feel that speaking tasks are not challenging. The problems have, in turn, influenced the students' performance in learning English. Most of them cannot speak English very well because the classroom situation appears as the source of difficulties, not the source of knowledge.

This situation also appears in the present research setting we examine. Out of 4 classes we teach, ALL C (pseudo) class seems to have the most serious English language mastery problems, especially in speaking. Their speaking proficiency score is relatively "low," as indicated by their daily speaking performance average score of 65. Students often feel nervous, afraid of speaking English, and unable to utter a word in English. When we asked them to speak, describing their favorite movie, most of them could not do it as they have no ample vocabulary yet high anxiety level. This situation requires strategic action to tackle the aforementioned problems. The strategy is supposed to provide the students with as many materials to speak as possible, make them feel free to speak without any fear of making mistakes, enrich their vocabulary, and provide them with a demanding opportunity to speak. Such criteria are granted throughout the inquiry-based learning strategy.

Inquiry-based learning might be of appropriate strategy to improve the students' speaking skills because the skills can boost the students' confidence and interest (Beyer, 1971) and foster students' curiosity and motivation (Suarez et al., 2017). It also supports the students to make sense of the speaking activities in their real life. The strategy will leave an everlasting knowledge in the students' minds because they know the language not merely by recording and storing but by constructing their understanding (Buchanan et al., 2016; Johnson, 2002). The above potential benefits of inquiry-based learning have driven the researchers to develop the students' speaking skills participating in an

intensive English course in the present university we examine. Given that such a problem might not necessarily be context-specific, this study might add nuances to dealing with other related cases in different settings. In this paper, we present a part of our study investigating ELT practices in Islamic Higher Education institutions incorporating perspectives of World Englishes, English as a Lingua Franca, and Linguistic Imperialism, among others. However, this paper focuses on reporting realities and voices of students regarding English language teaching practices as to which strategy they might appropriately need to build up their confidence necessary for their speaking skill improvement in the intensive English program they enroll.

The word “inquiry” is defined as to seek information or knowledge through seeking knowledge, information, or truth through questioning. This process is carried out by people in most of their daily life. Infants, for example, use sort of question to establish senses by turning towards voices, putting things into their mouths, or grasping things around their area. (Buchanan et al., 2016; Suarez et al., 2017). In the following development, the term “inquiry” here is employed to portray the approach in pedagogical setting driven more by a learner's questions than by a teacher's lessons. The underlying notion of this approach is constructivism that argues for unpacking meanings from the building blocks of knowledge (Khalaf, 2018). Burden (1999) defines inquiry is such an open-ended process and creative way of knowledge-seeking. One of its strength is that both the lesson content and the process of investigation are taught respectively. Using the process of inquiry provides the students with practical skills associated with critical thinking.

According to Schuman (as cited by Lemlech, 1994), inquiry-based learning is a process moves from observation to understanding. Inquiry begins with observation from which questions arise and making further observations so as to conclusion. During this process, the students learn to use critical thinking as they discuss and analyze the information and determine how to best present their findings. Inquiry-based learning should embrace the open learning principles that do not pre-determined learning objective. It emphasizes on individual ability to manipulate information and create meanings from a set of given materials or circumstances (Hannafin et al., 1999). It means that students themselves should assess the advantages and disadvantages of their activities and outcomes and determine their values. Open learning is more dynamic due to that the path chosen to an intended learning target is unsettled.

Banchi and Bell (2008) propose four models of inquiry-based learning: confirmation inquiry, structured inquiry, guided inquiry, and open inquiry. Within *confirmation inquiry* model, teachers provide students with questions and procedures (method), and the results are subtly pre-determined. The

structured inquiry model suggests teachers to provide questions procedures but students are invited to elaborate the reasoning with evidences. Unlike the two models, *guided inquiry* allows students to be more independent in designing procedures and responding questions formulated by the teacher. *Open inquiry* is more radical model, to some extent, since it lets students become and act like a scientist. Within this model, they could independently design procedure, formulate questions, and carry out investigations.

Frederick (1991) states that inquiry-based learning has a good implication toward the teaching and learning activities in the classroom. This strategy can foster the students to become more responsible and independent learners, and the students may have a good understanding on how to participate in a group work. Therefore, teachers or lecturers can apply inquiry based learning to all disciplines: economics, history, science, art, language, etc. Besides, the disciplines can be interconnected with inquiry-based learning, which guarantees the integrity of various disciplines.

A number of research reports have been published to promote its implementation. However, most of the studies were projected in the area of science courses. One of the mostly-cited researches is of Inquiry Page Project (2003), which examined the successfulness of inquiry-based science for middle school pupils, as demonstrated by their performance on high-stakes standardized tests. The improvement was 14% for the first group of students and 13% for the second one. This study also elucidated that inquiry-based learning successfully reduced the achievement gap for high school students in the country.

Thomas B. Fordham Institute view inquiry-based learning beneficial to implement in almost any field of study when teachers acted as supporters and facilitators for student learning (Bell et. al., 2010). They supported the implementation of the strategy when the teachers can plan the activities well prior to implementing them during the classroom session. Although the focus of the previous studies on science courses, they implicitly recommend that the inquiry-based learning be implemented and researched in any disciplines. This study is, therefore, devoted to fill such a lack of scientific evidence regarding the effective implementation of inquiry-based learning in speaking course within EFL teaching perspective.

In EFL framework, Kasbollah (2002) argues for the significant of inquiry-based learning method for activities in language teaching and learning process. The teachers are therefore recommended to design a class activity for inquiry to occur. Nurhadi (2002) exemplifies the use of inquiry-based learning strategy as follows: the students in group are instructed to observe any object or

situation outside the classroom. They, then, discuss and make notes of what they see and they bring as many as information to the classroom. Finally, they are asked to present what the information they have gathered.

METHOD

The design of this study belongs to Classroom Action Research (CAR). The research is respectively participatory and collaborative because it involves the lecturer in his own inquiry (McNiff, 1992) and employs joint work with colleagues to improve the practice of the strategy (Diane & Anderson, 2011). They work together in carrying out the cyclical process as proposed by Kemmis and Taggart (1998):

Preliminary Study

One of the purposes of conducting preliminary study is to identify the teaching and learning process, and –more practically– to evaluate the sense of (dis)satisfaction (Kasbolah, 2008). The feeling of dissatisfaction was experienced by the researcher when he did the *reconnaissance* through classroom observation, interview, and document examination in September 2020. The result of the preliminary study shows that the students' speaking proficiency is still under the designated standard of competence as they encounter several basic problems in speaking English.

Planning the Action

In reference to the identified problems, the researchers and the collaborator work together to:

- prepare the strategy for structured inquiry
- design a lesson plan as a guideline of the strategy
- prepare the source of materials and media. The use of the materials and media should connect the students' learning experience in the classroom to their own life outside it.
- set the criteria of success, which is used to assess if the strategy works to improve the students' speaking skill. The criteria are that:
 - a) The students are able to speak fluently and accurately as indicated by their achievement on the minimum score of 70
 - b) 75% of the class has positive attitude toward the implementation of the strategy.

The first criterion of success is analyzed based on the students' performance assessed through Harris' scoring scale (1990). Meanwhile, the second criterion is gained from the questionnaire analysis supported by the fieldnotes and interview results.

Implementing the Action

The research involves two parties who work together as a team. In this study, the researchers (observers) team up with the collaborator (lecturer) who teaches Intensive English I administered by the language center in the university of UMI, one of state universities in Malang.

Observing the Action

While implementing the action, observation is carried out to collect the data through several instruments: Test, questionnaire sheet, field notes, and interview guide. The first instrument was used to assess the students' speaking performance, while the others were designed to evaluate the students' attitude toward the implementation of the strategy.

Reflecting the Action

Koshy (2006) simplifies the activities of data analysis into three flows: data reduction, data display, and conclusion. In data reduction, the researcher selects, focuses, and transforms the data by referring to the criteria of success. In data display, we presented the data resulted from the test, questionnaire, field notes entries, and interview extracts in the forms of table and diagram. In conclusion, we verified the data from multiple perspectives and matches them with the criteria of success for the sake of identifying if another cycle is (un)necessary.

FINDINGS

The data of cycle reveal that the average of the students' speaking performance is 60. Most of the students got very low score in (phonological and lexical) accuracy. In terms of fluency, some of them still encountered a problem of formulating what they had to sequentially explain. Meanwhile, the students' ability in making their utterances understandable for others was quite good in the way that they had very close scores varying from 3 to 4.

The questionnaire was distributed after all students had presented the report. The collected information generally shows that the inquiry-based learning were (considered) not only a kind of joyful strategy but also a helpful approach to improve the students' speaking skill. For most students, the

activities provided them with extensive chances to practice speaking. They also thought that the strategy could raise their self-confidence.

In short, the result of the questionnaire analysis, which was supported by some information recorded in the fieldnotes, indicates that more than 75%, or precisely 100%, of the students had positive attitude toward the implementation of inquiry-based learning strategy and, thus, the second criterion of success was achieved.

However, as the first criterion of success has not been reached yet, the researcher decided to carry out another cycle by revising several aspects of the strategy. One of the revisions is allowing the use of dictionary during the investigation phase. This practice was aimed at eliminating the students' lexical and phonological inaccuracy. To improve the fluency, the students were encouraged to have peer conferencing through discussion phase. Such an activity could help them internalize and systematize the contents of the presentation as well as promote cooperative learning (Huda, 2011).

The revised actions implemented in cycle two could successfully improve the students' oral proficiency. The data shows that all students got the score not less than 70. The satisfying result was mostly supported by the progress of their accuracy and fluency. Meanwhile, the questionnaire result of cycle two is relatively similar to that of cycle one. In brief, both criteria were achieved successfully.

DISCUSSION

As this study demonstrates, there are several phases to take in applying appropriate inquiry-based learning strategy to improve the Students' speaking skill. The followings are of important steps that lecturers should take into account. The first step is providing several guiding questions which stimulate investigation. This aims to elicit the students' background knowledge on the topic. One of likely ways to do so is providing proverbs as kinds of folklores. They are, then, followed by several stimulating questions which, according to Folse (2006), could create a challenge to the students to dig up their prior experience as well as trigger an investigation or further thinking. After that, the teacher should present mini lecture as a gate into main activities. The mini lecture contains brief-yet-clear explanation about the importance of the topic and the procedure of subsequent phases. The lecture should not take very long time because it may reduce the students' self-inquiry and bore them due to extended period of 'passive' learning (Loizou & Lee, 2020). The lecture should take at most 10 minutes because, according to Book (1999), only the first 10 minutes of a lecture hold learner interest effectively, even among native speaker students.

The second step is endorsing the students to investigate the given tasks. Investigation in the core of inquiry in which the students try to gather the required information by reading several texts and observing some phenomenon. Finding the meanings of words on a dictionary might also be carried out in this phase. The third step is facilitating the students to discuss the result of the investigation in a group of four students who have related topics. In a small group, the students try to create and organize the information they have. They can also determine what to include into and exclude from their speaking excerpt. As small group work increases the undivided amount of student talk going on in a limited period of time, it might lower the inhibitions of students who are unwilling to speak in front of the entire class (Hess, 2001). Group work could evidently decrease the students' anxiety and reluctance.

The next step is assigning the students to perform individual oral presentation on the result of the investigation and group discussion. This activity not only allows the lecturer to evaluate the students' ability more carefully but also encourages the students to speak in front of the class, showing their confidence, in their own manner and style, and on their own contents. Brown (2001) characterizes it as "individualization" process, in which every student finds her own way and makes her own chances for practice in using the language. At last, reflecting on the students' oral proficiency. The lecturer guides the students to look back at their own performance, especially on phonological, lexical, and structural aspects. Feedback from the lecturer is also important to prevent the students from fossilization of errors (Harmer, 2007).

It is likely that the students' speaking skill improvement is affected by their positive attitude toward the strategy. Supposing the influence of positive attitude on the success of learning is in fact analogous to one of Brown's 'Affective Principles' (2001), "learner's belief that they are fully capable of accomplishing a task is at least partially a factor in their eventual success in attaining the task." In brief, the students' outlook on classroom activities works hand-in-hand with their motivation in learning and, in turn, with their speaking proficiency.

CONCLUSION

The inquiry-based learning strategy was confirmed successful in improving the speaking skill of the students as they could exceed the minimum score set in the criteria of success. The success of the strategy, however, depends much on its effective application, which leads the students, 1) to respond to several guiding questions stimulating investigation; 2) investigate some texts, real objects, or persons to gather the required information; 3) create new ideas by discussing the information with

peers; 4) present the ideas in front of the class; and 5) reflect on their performance. Furthermore, the study revealed that all students had a favorable attitude toward the strategy as they experienced enjoyable learning in the speaking class. The students considered the task helpful in improving their skills to give enthusiastic support to the implementation of the strategy in future speaking classes.

Apart from inquiry-based learning, we would also suggest lecturers consider integrating students' linguistic repertoire and intercultural understanding in evaluating their speaking skills instead of fluency and accuracy, which tend to be oriented to native speakers' criteria. Appreciating students' local or vernacular English variety might also bolster their confidence necessary for their speaking improvement.

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