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CHALLENGES IN TEACHING SPEAKING TO EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract

This preliminary study aims to describe the challenges that the teachers face in teaching English speaking to their students in Aceh. Speaking is perceived as the most fundamental skill to acquire since the onset of the communicative era is treated as the ultimate goal of language teaching, and its proper development has become the attention of both teachers and learners. However, it is also a commonly recognized fact that achieving proficiency in foreign language speaking is not an easy task. Thus, it is important for teachers to be aware of the challenges in teaching speaking so that they can seek for solutions to them. Accordingly, this preliminary study collected data by interviewing two teachers from a public senior high school in Bireuen, Aceh. These teachers have been teaching English for the past ten years in the school, respectively. They revealed that the challenges they encountered most in teaching speaking are students' lack of vocabulary, pronunciation problems, nothing to say, lack of motivation and the use or interference of the mother tongue. Thus, the teachers do their best to overcome these challenges along the process of their teaching in the classroom, and some of their efforts are also discussed in the paper. Future studies are suggested to collect data from other sources such as observations in the classroom during the teaching and learning process and gather information from students themselves through interviews and questionnaires.

Keywords: Challenges, teaching, speaking, EFL learners.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is one of the basics which should importantly be mastered by English learners. Nunan (2003, p. 40) says that "speaking is the ability to express opinion, ideas, or thought orally; it consists of producing systematic verbal utterances to convey meaning in order to be understood by the people we are speaking with". Therefore, in language learning, the speaking ability is important to express thoughts, ideas and feelings with others.

For senior high school students, to have good English speaking skills is a requirement in the English subject. As Richards (2006) states the goal of teaching speaking is to provide learners with communicative competence and classroom activities that develop learners' ability to express themselves through speech. In Indonesia, the goal of teaching speaking to senior high school students of grade 10 as stated in the School-Based Curriculum (KTSP) is that students are expected to be able to express transactional and interpersonal meanings of the formal and informal language accurately and fluently, and are expected to use simple oral language varieties in daily contexts such as thanking, appraising and congratulating others (Depdiknas, 2006, p. 65).

Students should therefore actively participate in the teaching and learning process, especially in speaking. Through speaking, students will be familiar with utterances used. Learning to speak English fluently and accurately is always a grand task in learning a foreign language. It offers advantages for students. It can increase professional vocabulary, especially when we communicate with other people. Harmer (2004) states that getting students to speak or to use the language they are learning is a vital part of a teacher's job. Students are the people who need the practice, not the teacher. From this statement, it can be concluded that the teacher aims to develop students' ability in speaking skill.

However, it is undeniable that English teachers face challenges in teaching speaking, especially to EFL learners. This is commonly found in English classes in all schools in Aceh. We wanted to further investigate these challenges from the teachers' perspectives. And so, our research question is: What are the challenges faced by English teachers in teaching speaking to EFL learners?

The study is expected to provide information for English teachers, especially senior high school teachers about the challenges that teachers face in teaching speaking to EFL students. By understanding these challenges, then teachers can be prepared to find solutions to overcome these challenges when teaching in the classroom.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nowadays, speaking is generally perceived as the most fundamental skill to acquire. Since the onset of the communicative era it has been treated as the ultimate goal of language training and its proper development has become the focus of attention on both teachers and learners. However, it is also a commonly recognized fact that achieving proficiency in foreign language speaking in classroom conditions is not an easy task. Even advanced learners often finish a language course with the conviction that they are not sufficiently prepared for speaking beyond the classroom.

This difficulty results basically from the character and inadequate frequency of speaking opportunities in the classroom in comparison to the abundance of natural varieties and genres of oral communication. Furthermore, Harmer (2007) has reported that students are often reluctant to speak because they are shy and are not predisposed to expressing themselves in front of other people, especially when they are being asked to give personal information or opinions. Students often feel worried about speaking badly and thus losing face in front of their classmates. In fact, selecting the most appropriate types of spoken discourse for classroom practice in a particular language course is also a very hard. Additionally, Thornbury (2007, 31) argues the decision must be appropriately made in order to make use the regular speaking practice in the classroom to go beyond.

Moreover, Ur (1995, p. 121) mentions some problems in teaching speaking including inhibition – fear of making mistakes, losing face, criticism, shyness; nothing to say – learners have problems with finding motives to speak, formulating opinions or relevant comments; low or uneven participation – often caused by the tendency of some learners to dominate in the group; mother-tongue use – particularly common in less disciplined or less motivated classes, where learners find it easier or more natural to express themselves in their native language.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The participants of this study were two English teachers who taught in the first grade of SMA Negeri 1 Bireuen. This school was chosen because the two teachers had initially discussed with the second writer about their challenges in teaching speaking in their English class. To further gain information, this research was conducted and in depth interviews were done with the two teachers. Therefore the instruments used to collect data were the interview guide and classroom observation sheets. The interviews were conducted to get the data unobtainable through observations (Ary, Jacobs & Sorensen, 2010). Each teacher taught three classes of the first graders. The first teacher taught the classes of students in the Sciences group (or known as *Kelas IPA*), meanwhile the second teacher taught students in the Social Sciences group (or known as *Kelas IPS*). The second writer observed two of their classes during the teaching of English speaking.

The data that were then analyzed by systematically searching and arranging interview transcripts, field-notes, and the observation sheets. There are three activities of data analysis in descriptive qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Sugiyono, 2008). Those activities are data

reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification and those were what the writers had done with the data from this study. The results are then reported descriptively in this paper.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The teachers mentioned some challenges that were related to teaching speaking to EFL learners with each teacher facing different problems due to different context, students and situation of the classroom in which they taught. Accordingly, we had categorized their challenges into the following problems.

Challenges Faced by Teacher One (T1)

T1, who taught students in the Sciences group, informed that she faced challenges in students' inhibition, nothing to say, low participation, and students keep using their L1 in class. Based on her explanations, the following inferences are made.

Students' Inhibition

When a student speaks, it requires other students to have all eyes to him/her and exposure to the audience could often give students fright. They were also worried about making mistakes. In this case, T1 said:

"When I asked the students to practice their English, some students said to me, 'I can not, I will make mistakes'. Actually, they are clever, when they have written exams, their scores are high, but they have difficulties in speaking in class. They are still shy...afraid".

Nothing to Say

One of the problems that the students felt really shy about was talking in front of other students; they suffered from fear of making mistakes and "losing face in front of their teacher and their peers", as said by T1. Speaking in front of other people needs courage, motivation from inside and outside such as a joyful atmosphere in the conversation and interesting topics. Another cause is that there were students who dominate and almost intimidate others with their better ability.

In T1's class, many students have good ability in English writing skill but when they should communicate in English, they failed to express their ideas verbally. They were afraid and anxious about saying something wrong or incomprehensible, especially when some students were not familiar with the topic. T1 informed:

"I divided the topics for them so each pair or group can talk about different things, but there were students who kept silent, and when I asked them why they were so, they said they were confused and did not know what to say because they did not really know about the topic".

Low Participation

There were always dominant students in the English class which makes it difficult for more reserved students to express themselves freely. Reserved students look for the teacher's attention and sit in the back and watch the lesson unfolding instead of participating. In this case, T1 said:

"Most of the times, the reserved students just sit in the back, listen and watch the lesson, but they do not respond to the lesson".

Students Keep Using their L1

Another problem that T1 faced was that the students used their native language rather than English to perform classroom tasks. This might happen because they wanted to communicate something important, and so they used the language they know best. They had difficulty saying them in English and because they do not want to lose face in front of their peers, they think that they better use their native language so that others can understand them. For this situation, T1 said:

"I ask something to the students in English so they answer in English, but sometimes they answer in Bahasa Indonesia because they do not know how to say them in English".

Challenges Faced by Teacher Two (T2)

T2, who taught students in the Social Sciences group, mentioned some of the challenges she faced in teaching the students here. They are explained as follows.

Pronunciation Problems

Many students had pronunciation problems and this is common because English and Bahasa Indonesia have different sound system. T2 explained:

“When I walked around the class during activity time, I often hear students mispronounce English words. I do not tell them directly how to say them correctly, but I would write the words on the board and after the activity time is over, I review all of the words and ask the class to practice pronouncing the words together”.

Lack of Motivation

Ellis (1986, p. 11) states that learners’ motivation and needs have always had a central place in language learning. Thus, T2 found that many of her students lack the motivation to learn English because they told her that it is a difficult language. She adds:

“They tell me English is difficult, so I motivate and encourage them through the methods and techniques in teaching speaking. Through the methods, they are required or forced to speak. So students who never speak in English will speak”.

Lack of Vocabulary

Vocabulary refers to the words the students must understand to communicate effectively, but some learners have poor vocabulary. T2 said:

“I asked the students to practice their English with their partners, but...sometimes they lacked the vocabulary to say something in English, so that they used their mother tongue. Um....I think vocabulary also needs to be improved, then pronunciation. They are less active because they lack these skills”.

CONCLUSION

From the results, we found that both teachers faced different problems in their classes. T1’s challenges were students’ inhibition, nothing to say, low participation, and students keep using their L1 in class. Meanwhile, T2’s challenges were pronunciation problems, lack of motivation and lack of vocabulary. Essentially, these challenges are included in the components of speaking skills that must be mastered by students when learning speaking in a foreign language (i.e. pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency and pronunciation). We assert that the ways to overcome these problems is by applying various techniques and methods in the English speaking class.

This study is conducted with limitations. For future research, we suggest that more teachers from various schools are observed and interviewed to gain better understanding on the challenges that English teachers face in teaching English to EFL learners. Therefore, appropriate solutions can be sought to assist the learners in improving their speaking skills.

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