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ADOPTING A TEACHING-LEARNING CYCLE FRAMEWORK FOR EFL SPEAKING CLASSES IN HIGHER EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the implementation of a teaching-learning cycle framework in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaking classes at Samudra University, Aceh. This investigation focused on analyzing the applicability of the framework in EFL speaking classes and the students' perceptions of the framework adoption on their speaking learning. A qualitative method was used in this study where the data taken from classroom observations, student's open-form questionnaires, and lesson plans. The subjects were 25 students in the third semester attending a course named Speaking III. The findings show that the students are more active, motivated, and confident to their classroom English speaking practices and find more English language expressions and vocabularies through this applicable framework, the students perceive the cycle speaking activities positively, and all students undoubtedly support the lecturer's continuity of the framework adoption to other English Speaking classrooms. Hence, teachers of oral English classes are suggested to consider adopting this framework that some insights on how they could work within the cycles are offered in this study, such as the tutor's position within the cycles and the development of cycle sequence in teaching.

Keywords: Teaching-learning cycle, framework, EFL speaking classes, higher educational contexts.

INTRODUCTION

English speaking skills have become inevitably important for students in higher educational contexts (Abbasi, 2010; Buriro & Siddiqui, 2015; Chen & Goh, 2011; Gan, 2013; Richards & Renandya, 2002; Senthamarai & Chandran, 2016). A remarkably rapid globalisation in developing countries has created the reality that English speaking skill is undoubtedly an essential factor for young graduates' success in both their academic work and career path (Buriro & Siddiqui, 2015; Senthamarai & Chandran, 2016).

Nevertheless, much of this research conveys that the acquisition of English speaking skill is still problematic and widely considered as a daunting task for most students in any academic disciplines (Abbasi, 2010; Buriro & Siddiqui, 2015; Chen & Goh, 2011; Gan, 2013; Heriansyah, 2012; Maulana, et al., 2016; Richards & Renandya, 2002; Senthamarai & Chandran, 2016; Sun & Yang, 2015; Yen, Hou & Chang, 2015; Zou, 2013). According to Shumin (2002), a foreign language speaking skill is difficult for language learners due to an interconnected knowledge of grammatical and semantic conventions of the target language that needs to be acquired appropriately by the learners. In addition, another study (Yen, Hou, & Chang, 2015) described that a deep connection of social and cultural interactions into the target language becomes an essential factor to help learners improve their EFL speaking skill. From aforementioned studies, they indicate that an ability of English speaking skill is quite

challenging for students in tertiary levels where English communication skill is designed as a set of their academic curriculum.

Pertaining to the challenges of English speaking skill encountered by university students in EFL contexts, there were several previous studies' findings that had been resulted in Pakistan, India, China, and Taiwan (Buriro & Siddiqui, 2015; Gan, 2013; Senthamarai & Chandran, 2016; Sun & Yang, 2015; Yen, Hou & Chang, 2015). The studies taking this orientation generally concluded that prevalent difficulties faced by EFL students in learning speaking included low English proficiency, inadequate linguistic competence (knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation), lack of opportunity to engage in English, lack of motivation, unfriendly environment to speak English, inactive participation for speaking, and lack of confidence. Ironically, these difficulties were also perceived by English education major students who are the candidates of English language teachers (Heriansyah, 2012; Maulana, *et al.*, 2016).

These findings were also commensurate with what the author found during her first teaching in oral English classrooms in English Education Department of Samudra University, Aceh. In general, the prime problems faced by the students at that time are uneven participation, less motivated/confident to practice English speaking, and being afraid of making mistakes, beyond other challenges like inadequate English proficiency and linguistic deficiency. There are only few students who can communicate in English deliberately and give responses to the lecturer's questions confidently. Most of others tend to keep quiet and look anxious. These students' problems were also admitted by their previous lecturer.

In light of the major problems faced by my students, the writer eagerly attempts to find an effective method or framework that offers more opportunities for students to use English for spoken communication in class and exposes them to more classroom English speaking practices, as suggested by Gan (2013) and Buriro, Siddiqui (2015). I understand that the curriculum of English learning in Indonesia is developed based on one of the solid foundations relying on a language model presented by Halliday, "language as the means whereby people interact" (1978, p. 10); this explicit language framework is realised in Indonesian curriculum which employs the genre approach (Junaidi, 2012). Mickan (2012) explains that genre curriculum is underpinned by systemic functional grammar which allows learners to analyse the whole text with the focus on purposes and wording (lexico-grammar) selections of different texts in composing their own texts. The notion of this approach has relevance to language theory that underpins a teaching approach to conversation, called a top-down/genre-driven model instruction. In this, the learners' conversational proficiency is built up through their actions in analysis of whole texts, including grammatical, lexical, phonological features, and the structure of text before producing their own texts (Thornbury & Slade, 2006).

In terms of teaching instruction, the top-down approach can be conducted by the teachers through the stages of a teaching-learning cycle in genre approach proposed by Feez (1999, 2002), and Thornbury and Slade (2006). The teaching-learning cycle framework helps teachers to organise and sequence their syllabus elements (topics, texts, language features, skills, activities and tasks) in EFL teaching into a coherent, systematic, and manageable way and allows students to have more learning opportunities to meet their learning objectives for a specific skill (Feez, 1999, 2002).

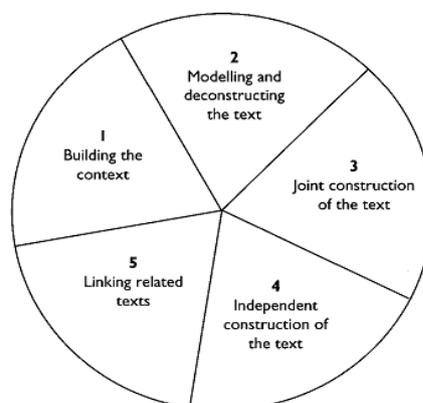


Figure 1. The teaching-learning cycle framework (Feez, 1999, p. 13).

Specifically, in the context building phase, the students have opportunities to explore and experience the situational aspects of the target text. Also, it may be an important phase to build vocabularies. Further, during the modelling and deconstruction phase, the students are guided to build their knowledge about specific features of English in the target text and structure of the text. Discovery learning techniques, drills, and direct teaching are suggested to be included in this phase, which aims to help students explore language at whole text. At the third phase, joint construction, the students are working with peers to incorporate their new knowledge to practice and the teachers act as an advisor/editor. When the teachers are sure that the students have been set up to succeed in the target text, the phase is moved to the independent construction phase. Finally, the opportunities to recycle knowledge and skill what have been learnt before can be built into the phase of linking related texts (Feez, 1999, 2002).

However, studies about the applicability of the framework in EFL speaking classrooms and the students' perceptions of the framework adoption have, to the author's knowledge, never been conducted. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the applicability of the framework adoption within EFL speaking teaching and to probe students' perceptions of the framework adoption after the classes finished. The purpose of the study was to promote the teaching-learning cycle framework in oral English instructions for the development of teacher knowledge about English spoken teaching in EFL contexts.

In short, based on the explanation above, three research questions were focused for this study:

1. Can an adoption of the teaching-learning cycle framework in the speaking classes expose EFL students to more classroom English speaking practices?
2. Which phases of the teaching-learning cycle do really evoke the students to show their English speaking?
3. What are the students' perceptions about using the teaching-learning cycle framework by the lecturer to their speaking learning?

METHODS

This study employed several instruments related to qualitative research, which included classroom observations, open-form questionnaires, and lesson plans. Six classroom observations were conducted by the author, the researcher acting in the participant-observer role, during her teaching to identify what happened during the meetings and how students responded in each phase of the cycle. In the last meeting of the class, open-form questionnaires were utilised and distributed to students to allow the provision of un-influenced answers regarding all research questions. Analysis of these open-ended items also became additional information to compare what the lecturer found in the observations. Last, lessons plans were useful as a collection of information about teaching and learning activities performed during the meetings. The participants in this study were 26 students from two English speaking classes of the English Education Department, Samudra University, located in Langsa, Aceh. During the course, the teaching-learning cycle (see Figure 1) was implemented by the lecturer for teaching.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Applicability of Framework in Exposure to Classroom English Speaking Practices

The analysis of classroom observations shows that the implementation of a teaching-learning cycle framework had a positive impact to expose all students to more classroom English speaking practices. This finding can be realized through even participations performed by students for role play activities, debate, and reporting in front of class held in particular phases of full cycle.

This is also supported by the students at end-of-class reflections in the questionnaires. All students perceived the framework adopted by the lecturer in her teaching was helpful in boosting them to practice more English conversations and to be more active; it is due to that there were many interactive activities performed in the classrooms. Learning activities designed in this study reflect what Renandya and Richard (2002) suggested, stating that a key factor of foreign language development is a provision of opportunities for students to speak "in the language-promoting interaction" (2002, p. 208; Yen, et al., 2015). The learning activities which mostly evoked the students to practice their English speaking in the classrooms are presented in Figure 1 below.

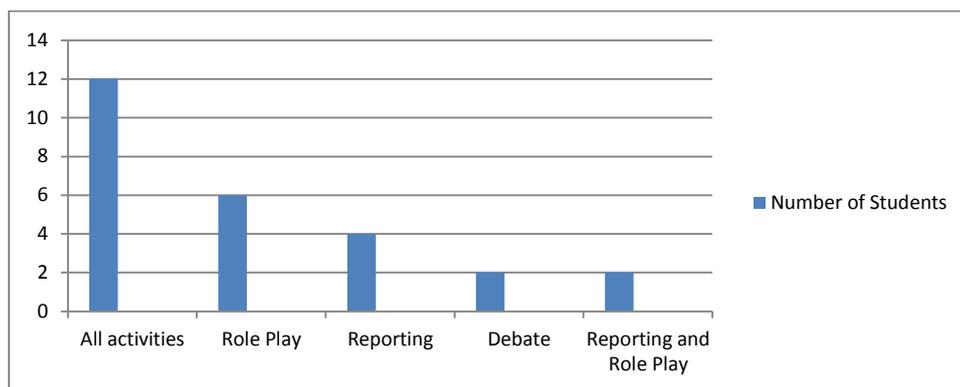


Figure 2. Speaking learning activities mostly preferred by the number of students.

Looking further into the details, all activities (role play, reporting, and debate) were considered by most students as an influential classroom activity which encouraged them to speak English (12 references). Further, it is followed by role play activities with a particular topic (6 students), reporting to the class (4 students), and debate activities (2 students). Meanwhile, there were two students who thought that both role play and reporting to the class as the most motivating learning instructions. Here is a comment expressed by one of the students:

The method when we are doing interview and then report in front of class. I think it's so good to practice English speaking because we must study hard to can speak English well and for our confidence if one day we become a teacher to speak with the students. (Student 7)

From the explanation above, the study found that the framework of the teaching-learning cycle was applicable to be used in EFL speaking classes, particularly which aimed to expose the students to more English classroom speaking practices. Also, the learning activities performed within a full cycle served as the drive that motivated the students to be more active for doing English conversations in the classrooms.

Students' English Speaking Practice-Provoking Phases

The analysis of the observations and lesson plans showed that the teaching learning cycle framework was implemented during the course (see Appendix I). The process involved five phases for two main topics: (1) Expressions for Arguing and (2) Job Interview (see Appendix I). Even though there were only two lesson topics, the entire process lasted 5 meetings/weeks. It means that when working within this framework, the teachers may not execute teaching and learning cycles in one meeting for each lesson topic. In executing the entire cycles, they need to fully consider the current state of students' knowledge/skill (Feez, 1999; 2002). For example, a full cycle implemented in this study could be executed for three meetings in the topic of "expressions for arguing", and for two meetings in the topic of "job interview", in light of considering the students' oral English skills and course objectives. It can be seen that, in this current study, the framework initiated by the genre-based approach is not misguided in the classroom practices, and it is a different occurrence compared with what has been presented by Junaidi (2012) in his study regarding serious errors in interpreting the teaching-learning cycle framework of the genre-based approach.

Meanwhile, during the framework implementation, the study found that a sequence of phases of teaching and learning were related to each other and seemed prepare the students to reach the students' potential level for English speaking practices. This view can be seen from the students' comments in the questionnaires stating that the activities in the phases of building the field and modelling/deconstructing the text which analysed English expressions or vocabularies in the selected texts have affected the students' speaking skills, particularly in terms of English language expression recognition and use (10 references). Further, another six students also commented that pronunciation teaching practices in both phases were really useful in correcting their pronunciation and grammar.

Consequently, from the observation results and the students' comments, when the students were in the three latter cycles: joint construction of the text, dependent construction of the text, and linking related texts, the students had been more confident. Moreover, according to all students' comments, the learning activities, such as role play, reporting in front of the class, and debate, as presented in Figure 2, can be considered as tremendous practices in encouraging them to speak English in the classrooms.

By understanding the explanation above, it can be concluded that the phases of joint construction of the text, dependent construction of the text, and linking related texts are phases which strongly evoked the students' English speaking practices during the course. This finding also echoes an explanation by Feez (1999; 2002), stating that these three latter phases are the stages which are particularly important for students to work with and to put their new knowledge into actions and interactions as a language user.

Student's Perceptions of the Framework Adoption

Positive perceptions about the framework adoption were found in all students' comments. All students suggested that the lecturer needs to continue its adoption for other speaking courses. The most mentioned benefits were that the teaching –learning cycle framework was useful in enriching the students' English language expressions and vocabularies, increasing their motivation and confidence, making them to be active speakers, clarifying their pronunciation, and helping them to practice English easily. Here are two selected comments expressed by the students:

I suggest the lecturer use this method again because it makes us more active than before lecture, so our English getting well again. (Student 3)

The teaching-learning cycle is useful for improving my motivation to speak English because we're often made a conversation in the class, debated English, reported a interview between interviewer and pelamar, reported a news or someone and more ways. The lecturer must use this method again beause if we're often and keep useful the teaching learning cycle method, it help us to do easy way in speaking English. (Student 16)

In addition, a positive view of the framework adoption was shared by a student with English speaking anxiety. Below is the student comment:

With the sense of my fear, so I rehearse my speaking, I'm sure I could make a better learning because the way it's very motivating to be more active in learning and speaking. (Student 14)

The student's comment above seems answered what Liu and Jackson thought (Gan, 2013) regarding a serious issue of anxiety problems that needs to be resolved by oral English lecturers. Consequently, the findings of this study appears to be a solution that contribute the methodological framework that can be implemented to improve EFL teaching and learning for speaking skills and to resolve the oral English problems faced by students in other previous studies (Buriro & Siddiqui, 2015; Gan, 2013; Senthamarai & Chandran, 2016; Sun & Yang, 2015; Yen, Hou & Chang, 2015).

CONCLUSION

English speaking skills were considered as a daunting task by most of EFL students in higher tertiary levels which brought the prime classroom problems, such as uneven participation and lack of confidence to practice English spoken texts. The teaching-learning cycle framework can be conceptualized as an effective framework that provides more opportunities for students to a language promoting interaction. This paper analyses the implementation of the framework applicability in EFL speaking classes and students' perception of the framework adoption on their speaking learning. It was found that the framework is very useful and applicable to expose the students to more classroom English practices and to improve their motivation and confidence for being active English speakers. All students perceived the framework adoption positively and supported the continuity of its implementation to other English Speaking Courses.

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