IMPROVING STUDENTS' READING SKILLS THROUGH COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted at MAN Beureunuen, in Pidie District, Aceh to improve the students' reading skills through Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which was implemented with the students from Class XII-IPA1 through a Classroom Action Research (CAR) study. The researcher employed four procedures of the CAR in each teaching–learning session. For the teaching-learning of reading, the study followed these four steps. The findings from the implementation of the CLT method for the teaching-learning of reading in Cycle 1 were not successful. The teacher's performance in cycle 1 was 72%. There were three weaknesses in his teaching via: weak ability to explain the lesson, weak ability to answer the students' questions and weak ability to use media. Meanwhile, the performance of the students was only 71%. They still had poor ability to understand the lesson, their participation in the group was still not good and their attention was also still low. Furthermore, the students' mean score in the test after cycle 1 was 74%. Therefore, Cycle 2 was conducted to try to improve on these scores. As a result, the participation of the students went up to 87%; their average score for the test was 85%. The teacher's performance also went up to 88%. Meanwhile the students' responses toward the implementation of CLT in teaching and learning reading process were very positive. Results from the questionnaire showed that the total mean score for all five items was 3.38 (in the strongly agree criterion) or 84%. All of the problems stated above had been successfully overcome and the results from resolving the problems of the research study had met the criterion of success.

Key words: *Reading Skills, CLT, Group Work Techniques/Activities.*

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INTRODUCTION

Background of Study

The Indonesian Department of National Education has issued the School Based Curriculum (KTSP) 2006 as a guide for English teachers in the teaching-learning processes, at Senior High Schools. The curriculum sets out standard competencies and basic competencies, for the four integrated language skills viz: Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing.

In teaching English as a foreign language, reading is one of the most important factors in determiming a learner's linguistic competence. Reading is a receptive language process. It is the process of recognition, interpretation, and perception of written or printed materials. Reading proficiency plays a great role in understanding a written statement accurately and efficiently. Reading serves as an important tool in every field of professional service and it contributes to the successful learning of a language. Hence it usually receives more emphasis in education than the other skills.

Reading is the most important language skill to be improved amongst students. In the syllabus from the KTSP curriculum: students are expected to be able to comprehend the meaning of short functional texts and other genre of texts.

Furthermore, in the National Examinations (UN) for High School students, reading comprehension skill is considered a key success skill for the students. There are 50 questions in the National Exam consisting of 35 questions for reading skills and the rest for listening skills. Thus 70 percent of the questions deal with reading comprehension skills.

In fact, the results for students' reading skills is still unsatisfactory. An improvement by the students is needed to achieve success in mastering reading. As Brown (2001: 298) has said, "Reading ability will be developed best in association with listening, speaking and writing activities". English teachers must try to make their students enjoy reading. Anderson (2003: 28) has defined reading as "an enjoyable, intense, private activity, from which much pleasure can be derived, and in which one can become totally absorbed".

In improving reading skills, a student needs competence and intelligence to comprehend the meaning in a text. This is called reading comprehension. In reading comprehension, students are expected to

understand well the reading material in order to be able to gain the information correctly and accurately and to improve their knowledge.

Furthermore, there is a composite skill in improving students' reading, consisting of several skills: the skill to relate words with previous experiences, the skill to understand the grammatical relationship amongst the words in syntactical construction, the skill to refer to some other sources of information for the meaning of words that the reader has not encountered before and the skill to communicate what has been read and such like. In this case, a good reader is supposed to have all these skills in order to benefit from reading.

From the above explanation, it can be concluded that the aim of teaching reading skills is to train the students to be able to comprehend or decode a variety of texts in the target language.

The researcher took a sample of third class (year 12) students from the Islamic Senior High School (MAN) at Beureunuen in Pidie District, Aceh. About 60 percent of these students still had a low level of achievement in reading skills even though they have been studying English for five years or more. Some problems might have occurred to influence these students and their teachers. These problems must be overcome to improve the students' reading skills in order to gradually reach the target language requirements in the curriculum.

There are various methods, approaches and techniques that can be used by teachers in conducting teaching-learning of English (ESL or EFL) in the classroom viz: the Grammar Translation Method, the Audio-lingual Method, the Total Physical Response Method, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Method, the Teaching Productive Skills and Communicative Activities Method and so on.

Some classroom action research studies have been done related to the improvement of reading skills. As an example, Elvinda (2012) a student in the graduate program for English Education at Syiah Kuala University conducted an action research study with 2nd grade (year 11) SMA students to improve their reading skills through the Interactive Approach. The students last score after cycle 3 was 87.5%. This score indicated that these students were successful in meeting the objectives for learning reading by using the Interactive Approach.

In accordance with the above, the writer was interested in trying the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach in an action research study to overcome the problems faced by students with poor reading skills especially using narrative texts. With the assumption that implementing the CLT approach could give a positive result in

improving students' reading, the writer thought that it was necessary to conduct this research.

The Research Problems
1. Will implementing CLT improve the reading ability of the students?
2. Will the students' reading achievements after CLT achieve the target score?
3. How will the students respond to the implementation of CLT in learning reading?

Research Objectives
To describe the process of implementing CLT to improve students' reading.
1. To improve the students' reading achievements by implementing CLT to achieve the target score.
2. To find out the students' responses toward the implementation of CLT in learning reading.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading Skills
Reading is a process where a reader gathers information from texts. Rayner (2001: 31) has stated, "Reading is defined as the level of understanding of a text/message. This understanding comes from the interaction between the words that are written and how they trigger knowledge outside the text/message". Reading skills are the abilities to master reading texts. Reading skills are defined as skills to improve reading comprehension, namely:
(1) to comprehend the meaning of a text
(2) to understand arguments in a text
(3) to identify cases explained in a text
(4) to understand recommendations given in a text
(5) to understand the rhetorical structures in a text
(6) to understand the communicative purposes of a text.

Communicative Language Teaching
The CLT approach is an integration of skills taught and learned with a communicative view. The objective of this approach is to help students develop communicative competence, i.e. the ability to

communicate original messages in real life situations in meaningful contexts.

Littlewood (2002: 1) has stated that one of the characteristic features of CLT is that it pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language, combining these into a more communicative view. Furthermore, Nunan (1991: 297) has described five characteristics of CLT:

1. An emphasis on learning to communicate through interactions in the target language;
2. The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation;
3. The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language, but also on the learning process itself;
4. An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as an important contributing elements in classroom learning;
5. An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom.

Meanwhile, in the learning activities, the researcher asked the students to join in group work activities. The researcher focused his efforts to develop the students' involvement during the classroom activities.

Group Work Techniques

Harmer (2007: 166) has stated that the classification of group work is a generic term covering a multiplicity of techniques in which two or more students are assigned a task that involves collaboration and self initiated language.

According to a survey by VUW's Career Development and Development Service (2004), a carefully planned group work provides an opportunity and social benefits for students. These include:

a. The development of co-operation and planning skills;
b. Opportunities for leadership and shared leadership;
c. Increases in active participation and involvement in the course;
d. Improved student performance;
e. Opportunities for students to work on large and/or complex projects;
f. The promotion of student autonomy by transferring some of the responsibility for teaching-learning to students.

Group Work in Teaching Reading Skills

Group Work is one way of work where brainstorming can be applied successfully. A task which is too difficult for an individual to

do, can be easy to do successfully in a group. Cottrell (1999: 12) has said that group work is where groups of students work in the same room or at the same event on a common problem that necessitates a group approach. If the group is managed in a totally autocratic manner, there may be little opportunity for interaction relating to the work however if there is functioning within the group, the process can be evolve so that all members of the group learn together.

Even if the problem can be decided by a single person, there are two main benefits in involving more students to carry out the decision. First, the motivational aspect of participating in the decision will clearly enhance its implementation. Second, there may well be factors which implementers understand better than the single person who supposedly can decide alone. In the teaching-learning of reading, the study encompasses the following steps in group-work activities; first, the teacher puts the students into pair groups. Second, the teacher then asks the student pairs to work together to answer the questions from the reading texts shared out to them by the teacher. Third, the representative student from each group gives the answers orally and also writes them down on the white board.

The Advantages of Group Work

Harmer (2007: 166) has stated that there are some advantages of group work.

1) Like pair work, it dramatically increases the number of talking opportunities for each individual student.
2) Unlike pair work, because there are more than two people in the group, personal relationships are usually less problematic; there is also a greater chance of different opinions and more varied contributions than in pair work.
3) It encourages broader skills of cooperation and negotiation than pair work, and yet is more private than work in front of the whole class.
4) It promotes learner autonomy by allowing students to make their own decisions in the group without being told what to do by the teacher.
5) Although we do not wish any individuals in groups to be completely passive, nevertheless, some students can choose their level of participation more readily than in whole of class or pair work situations.

Furthermore Brown (2001: 177) has also declared that the advantages of group work include:

a) Group work generates interactive language.
b) Group work offers an embracing affective climate.
c) Group work promotes learners responsibility and autonomy.
d) Group work is a step toward individualizing instructions.

The Disadvantages of Group Work

Harmer (2007: 166) has also said that some disadvantages of group work are:

1) It is likely to be noisy (though not necessarily as loud as pair work can be). Some teachers' feel that they lose control, and the whole-class feeling which has been instantly built up may dissipate when the class is split into smaller entities.

2) Not all students enjoy it since they would prefer to be the focus of the teacher's attention rather than working with their peers. Sometimes a student may find themselves in an uncongenial group and wish they could be somewhere else.

3) Individuals may fall into group roles that become fossilized, so that some are passive whereas others may dominate.

4) Groups can take longer to organize than pairs, beginning and ending group wok activities, especially where people move around the class, can take time and be chaotic.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This Classroom Action Research (CAR) was conducted by referring to a qualitative approach and using a descriptive approach to data collection. This is in accordance with what Mills (2000: 21) has defined, "Action research is systemic inquiry done by teachers (or other individuals in the teaching/learning environment) to gather information about - and subsequently improve - the ways their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how well their students learn".

The design of this CAR was a cyclical process adapted from the model proposed by Kemmis and McTeggart (1998: 22-25). There were four aspects of this action research: Planning, Action, Observation, and Reflection.

Research Setting and the Subject of the Research

The study was conducted by the researcher at MAN Beureunuen which is located on the main highway from. Banda Aceh to Medan at

Km.125, in Beureunuen, Pidie District. This school has fourteen classes: five classes for grade X, five classes for grade XI and four classes for grade XII. The researcher who did this research has been teaching English at this school for many years.

The subjects for this research study were all 30 students in grade XII IPA-1. The researcher chose grade XII-IPA-1 because of the following reasons:

1) It was necessary for him to conduct the research at the school to improve his strategies for teaching reading and for choosing reading materials as well.

2) He realized that the students' reading skills were still low and not achieving the target score which was unsatisfactory.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This research aimed to improve students' ability in mastering reading skills by using the CLT Method. There are three questions that the researcher intends to answer as mentioned in the Introduction. The answers are elaborated in this section.

The Process of Implementing CLT for Improving Students' Reading
The Teacher's Performance in Teaching Process of Cycle 1 and Cycle 2

Based on the observation sheet for the teacher, the researcher's performance for teaching reading in cycle 1 was 72% which is in the good criterion but did not yet meet the criterion for success. But after cycle 2, the researcher's performance for teaching reading was 88% (in the very good criterion) which is higher than the indicator of success.

The Performance of the Students during the Teaching-Learning Processes of Cycle 1 and Cycle 2

Referring to the observation sheets for the students, the reading performance of of the students after learning in cycle 1 was 71% which is in the good criterion but not yet above the criteria for success. However, after implementing cycle 2, their average reading performance was 87% which is in the very good criterion and is higher than the indicator level of success.

The Students' Reading Ability after Implementing The CLT In Achieving The Target Score.

The average score of the students can be seen from the following:

Students' average score in the post-test after cycle 1:

$$\text{Mean} = \frac{\sum X}{n} \qquad \text{Mean} = \frac{2220}{30} \qquad = 74.00$$

Students' average score in the post-test after cycle 2:

$$\text{Mean} = \frac{2550}{30} \qquad = 85$$

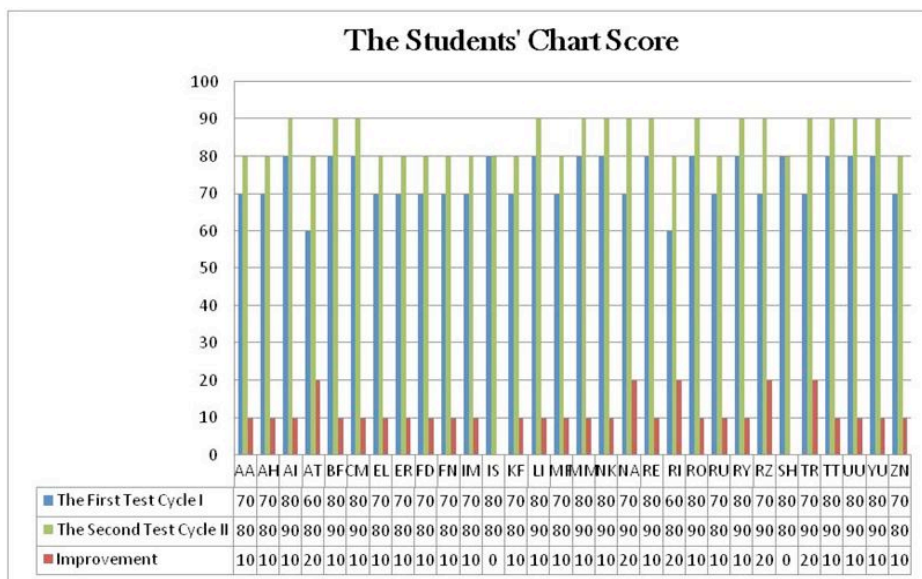There was significant progress during cycle 2 which can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Students' reading results after CLT teaching-learning processes.

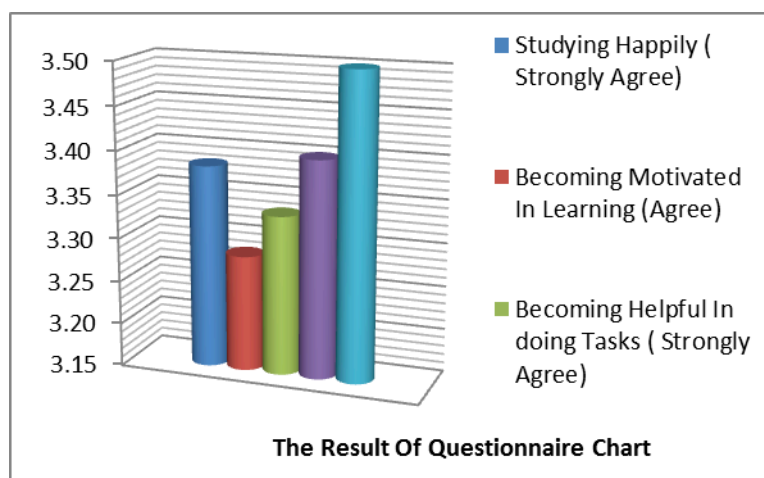The results from the questionnaire are summarized in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Results from the questionnaire.

The chart above shows that the students had very positive responses to the use of the CLT in improving their reading skills in the classroom. This was proved by the mean scores for all five factors shown above. The total mean score for all five factors was 3.38 (84%) which is in the strongly agree criterion.

DISCUSSIONS

The researcher's performance for teaching reading in the first cycle was 72% which was in the good criterion but had not yet achieved the indicator level for success. In general, the teacher's performance in cycle 1 was good, but there were three points that needed to be improved:
1) the ability to explain the lesson better to help the students understand the activities in the CLT more clearly,
2) the ability to answer the students' questions better, and
3) the ability to use the teaching media available better.

After conducting Cycle 2, the teacher's performance in teaching reading processes was 88% which is in the very good criterion and exceeds the level of the success indicator. Thus the researcher had successfully improved his weaknesses set out above.

Referring to the students' observation sheets, the performance of the students in the first cycle was 71% which is in the good criterion but did not yet meet the indicator level for success. In this case, there were three negative issues to be overcome:

1) the students' ability in mastering the three CLT activities,
2) the students' participation in their groups, and
3) the students' attention toward the media used by the teacher.

After conducting cycle 2, the students' participation was very satisfactory. The results of the students' activity was 87% which is in the very good criterion and which had successfully exceeded the level of the success indicator. Thus the researcher/observer had successfully overcome the three negative issues stated above.

Pre-test score before conducting the CAR of cycle 1 was 67. This was the students' base score for reading. Meanwhile, the target score was 75. The students still had low ability in mastering all the aspects of reading skills. Therefore, the researcher had to conduct his CAR to improve the students' reading skills to achieve the target score.

Test result after cycle 1 was 74. This was an improvement but had not yet met the level of the success indicator. In general, the students still had low ability in three aspects, viz:
a) References;
b) Main ideas; and
c) Sentence meanings

The test result after cycle 2 was 85. This showed that the students had improved their reading skills well and had exceeded the level of the success indicator.

The students' responses toward the implementation of CLT in their reading class are based on the scores from the questionnaire given to the students. The researcher divided the 10 questions on the questionnaire into five factors as elaborated below:
a) the mean score about studying happily was 3.38 (in the strongly agree criterion),
b) the mean score about becoming motivated in learning was 3.28 (in the agree criterion),
c) the mean score about becoming helpful in doing tasks was 3.33 (in the strongly agree criterion),
d) the mean score about becoming self-confident was 3.40 (in the strongly agree criterion), and
e) the mean score about becoming brave and active in learning was 3.50 (in the strongly agree criterion).

Thus most students' responses were in the strongly agree criteria which referred to the successful implementation of the CLT method in improving the reading skills of the students in the classroom.

To determine the students' perceptions, the researcher used the criteria proposed by Sugiyono (2007: 155):

1. 3.3 - 4.0 = Strongly Agree
2. 2.5 - 3.2 = Agree
3. 1.7 - 2.4 = Disagree
4. 0 - 1.6   = Strongly Disagree

The researcher made the mean scores of the students' responses to implementing the CLT method into percentages as shown in the table below:

Table 1. Mean scores and percentages for responses to questionnaire.

No	Category	Mean Scores	Percentages %
1	Studying happily	3.38	84.50
2	Becoming motivated in learning	3.28	82.00
3	Becoming helpful in doing tasks	3.33	83.25
4	Becoming encouraged in self-confident	3.40	85.00
5	Becoming brave and active in learning	3.50	87.50
	Average Percentage	3.38	84.45

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the research results and the preceding discussions, the researcher as the teacher involved in the teaching-learning process for reading comprehension has the following important points to make:

(1) Using CLT is an effective way to improve students' reading skills.
(2) Both the teacher's performance and the students' performance improved very much during the teaching-learning reading processes in the reading class. So, both the teacher and the students were able to improve on their own weaknesses.
(3) The students' reading skills had improved to exceed the criteria of the success indicator after the second cycle without needing to continue to a third cycle.
(4) The total of the students' responses was very positive and strongly agreed with the use of CLT for improving their reading skills. The CLT method has changed the reading class atmosphere to be better than before. So, the students felt very happy, comfortable and enthusiastic during the teaching-learning processes for reading using the CLT activities.

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