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USING INFORMATION GAP ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE STUDENTS' ENGLISH SPEAKING PERFORMANCE AT HA TINH UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to improve the speaking skills of the majored first year students at Ha Tinh University (HTU) by using information gap activities. The research was conducted in two cycles with three meetings for each. Data were collected through observations and tests (the pre-test, the progress test, and the post-test). The actions implemented in this research included applying information gap activities in the learning process, improving students' vocabulary, speaking out in front of the class, and giving rewards to the best performance. The result showed that the use of information gap activities was of help in improving the students' speaking skills. The students were more confident in speaking in English. They could retell the story fluently and their vocabulary also increased. Furthermore, the students were actively engaged in the teaching-learning process. They were enthusiastic in doing the activities, and their English speaking performance also improved.

KEYWORDS

Information Gap Activities, speaking skills, action research.



1. Introduction

It is obvious that language plays a very important role in human's life. According to Charles Barber (1993, p.2), basically, a language is something which is spoken: the written language is secondary and derivative. In the history of each individual, speech is learned before writing. Hornby (1994, p.398) says that speaking is expressing ideas or feelings using language. Therefore, speaking is not only uttering ideas in mind, but also delivering and presenting new information to other people.

However, based on the classroom observation and interviews with students in Ha Tinh University, the researcher had conducted, she found some problems related to students and the learning media. Many students could not express their ideas and opinions in English. They had to memorize their texts or just read them in the speaking class. They were hesitant, worried, and anxious if they had to speak and perform using English. Those conditions could happen because they did not have sufficient vocabulary, they could not pronounce the words well and also lacked of confidence. Therefore, they were still not fluent enough to speak in English. Besides, during the observation many students did not pay attention to the teacher, they seemed unenthusiastic. Many of them were busy talking to their friends or doing another business instead of listening to their teacher.

In addition, the teacher did not really create communicative situations to the students. Although the teacher could deliver the materials well, she did not give enough opportunities for students to practice their speaking. Mostly, the activities were teacher-centered. The English teacher was the one who actively spoke and gave instructions to the students. Furthermore, the English teacher also did not make use of any learning media to support her teaching process. This situation made the students became more bored and exhausted of the same activities in the class.

With these considerations in mind, the researcher employed information gap activities (IGA) with an attempt to improve the students' speaking skills. Information gap activities are useful activities in which one person has information that the others lacks. They must use the target language to share that information (Bailey, as cited in Nunan, 2003, p.56). Using information gap activities is effective to create students' participation in speaking. As stated by Spratt, Pulverness, and Williams (2005,p.35), sometimes students speak more willingly in class when they have a reason for communicating, e.g. to solve a problem or to give other classmates some information they need.

Previous studies have shown the effectiveness of using information gap activities (IGA) in enhancing speaking skills. However, few studies have investigated the actual effect of IGA in teaching classes. Two action research studies in Indonesia (Defrioka (2009) "Improving Students' Interaction In Speaking class Through Information Gap Activities" and Sari (2008) "Improving Students' speaking Mastery Using Information Gap at the Second Year of SMP N3Kebakramat Karangany") showed that implementing IGA in speaking classes improved students' interaction, motivation, and achievement. In Vietnam, a study by Nguyen Thi Thu Trang (2009) "Using IGA to enhance speaking skills for the first year students in ED-ULIS-VNU" indicated that IGA was widely used but faced some challenges in adapting activities, organizing crowded classes, and involving students. Overall, the literature review suggests that using IGA in teaching speaking is a popular practice, and further research could explore its specific effect on student motivation and English speaking performance.

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. To what extent do IGA improve English speaking of students in English speaking class?

2. What difficulties do teachers encounter while applying IGA in teaching English speaking skills?

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The participants in this study included 26 English major students, both male and female, who were in their first year at HTU. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 20. Their level of English proficiency is pre-intermediate. The study took place over a 10-week period.

2.2. Research instruments and data collection procedure

2.2.1. Research instruments

Observation and test were used to collect data for the research.

Observation: The researcher observed the teaching and learning process to answer research question 1 and for reflection. The observation dealt with the real situation of teaching and learning. Notes were made during each observation.

Test: The test included a pre-test, post-test I, and post-test II for the class. The pre-test was conducted before the research implementation to assess students' speaking ability. The first and second post-tests were given after implementing the action in the first and second cycle.

Validity of Test: The researcher used content validity to determine the appropriateness of the interpretations of test results.

Reliability of Test: The researcher used scorer/rater reliability to ensure consistency of test scores. Scorer/rater reliability was used for oral tests by Penny Ur (1996).

2.2.2. Data collection procedure

This classroom action research by Kemmis and McTaggart (2010) was conducted collaboratively to improve students' speaking ability. The procedures of action research were:

a. Identifying the problem

- Problem: students had low speaking ability
- Cause: lack of confidence

b. Planning the action: Materials, lesson plan, teaching aids, and test were prepared

c. Implementing and observing the action

- Teaching and learning process using information gap activities were applied
- Two cycles of implementation

d. Reflecting the result of observation

- Pre-test and post-test given to evaluate students' speaking ability
- Result of the test was analyzed to find weaknesses in the teaching activity
- Cycle was stopped when students achieved the standard indicator, which was a significant improvement in their speaking ability.

e. Revising the plan

The plan was then revised for the next cycle based on identified weaknesses. The revised plan consisted of two cycles aimed at addressing students' speaking ability problems.

The observation gathered data on the teaching and learning process, which was analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. Qualitative data was analyzed using Burns' stages: data assembly, coding, comparison, interpretation, and reporting. Quantitative analysis was done by comparing pre-test and post-test scores using the mean formula.

The formula of the mean of the pre test and post test could be calculated as follows:

$$X = \frac{\sum x}{N} \qquad Y = \frac{\sum y}{N}$$

Notes:

X : Mean of pre test scores

Y : Mean of post test score

N : Number of subject

$\sum x$: The sum of pre test score

$\sum y$: the sum of post test score

(Sumanto, 1995:210)

The researcher also compared mean scores of pre-test, post-test 1, and post-test 2 to evaluate students' speaking ability.

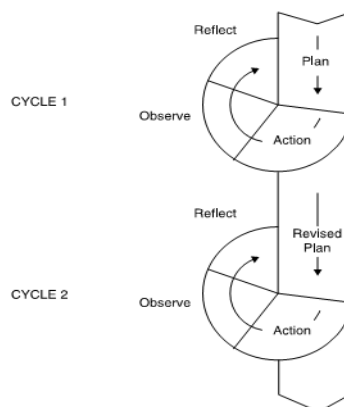


Figure 1: Action Research Cycles by Kemmis and McTaggart (2010)

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

3.1.1. Documents applied in the action research

In order to have a general view of the subject syllabus that is currently carried out of Department of Foreign Languages a brief description of tasks from the textbook was given. Northstar is designed

to provide an integrated course that covers the two language skills: listening and speaking, in that order, gradually students' language skills will develop.

Each of these volumes shares the distribution of 10 teaching units and items; each unit carries its own topic that is diversified. Each of which is made up of: Focus on Topic, Focus on Listening, Focus on Speaking.

The task- types which are available in the current textbook Northstar 1 can be recognized cooperatively such as role – play, problem solving, and mostly pair works, group works. These tasks are almost used in the speaking lessons.

3.1.2. Research from Action research

In this process, the researcher played the role of a teacher as well as a collaborator/ observer to observe the English teaching learning process. She was in charge of teaching Speaking skill in the class for this term. The findings were taken from the beginning until the last teaching learning process done in this research. The research consisted of two cycles. The description of the findings could be explained as follows:

1) Identifying the Problem

In this step, the researcher did some observations to know pre-condition before the implementation of the action research. In the beginning of the research, the researcher observed the teaching and learning process and interviewed with some students. She found out that there were some students who were afraid to speak up. They got nervous whenever they tried to speak in front of the class. It was caused by the lack of opportunity given to the students to speak up. The teacher admitted that even though she had managed the time for the students to speak up but it had not been well done. She also said that the sum of the students was too big for an English class. From the interview with some students, the researcher also found that most of them were sometimes still unconfident to speak up. It was caused by the condition of that class does not support them to be active.

Based on the observation and interview between the teacher and students, the researcher identified that the students' speaking ability should be improved by implementing a technique of teaching and learning process that could overcome the problems. Therefore, the researcher designed the technique of teaching and learning process through IGA.

The researcher made a pre-test to know the condition of the students' speaking ability. The test was given by the researcher before doing implementation.

Then, the result of the pre-test showed that the students' speaking was still low. It was showed from the mean score of pre-test 59.8. It is still lower than the minimum standard. The minimum standard of English is 75. There were 8 students who got score more than 75. It meant that there were 18 students who got score under the minimum standard. The highest score in pretest was 80, and the lowest score was 40.

So, the researcher identified that the students' speaking ability needed to be improved. The researcher decided to improve it through a technique that was supported by means of IGA. IGA is two speakers having different bits of information, and they can only complete the whole picture by sharing that information because they have different information; there is a “gap” between them. IGA could be defined as good way to combine instruction.

2) Research Implementation

The implementation of this action research was held in two cycles. Each cycle consisted of three meetings. This part covered two cycles in which each consisted of: planning, implementing, observing, and reflecting the action result. Every cycle was consisted of three meetings and every meeting opened, main activity, and closing stage.

Report of Cycle 1

1) Planning

Based on the result of pre-test and interviews, the researcher arranged the planning. The plan consisted of lesson plan, and teaching materials. The first material was about descriptive text. The students could describe about people, animals and etc.

2) Implementing the Action Research

The implementation of the action was based on the teaching and learning activity stated in the lesson plan. There were three meetings in the first cycle. Each meeting includes: opening, main activity, closing.

3) Observing

The teaching and learning situation was better than before when the researcher took pre-test. In the first meeting, a lot of students started to learn about introducing themselves. The result of the observation could be explained as follows:

a) First meeting

The researcher came on time to the class. The students looked very crowded. In the first meeting, nobody absent in this class. The researcher was giving explanation about the material, some students did not pay attention to the researcher's explanation. But when the researcher gave an example of descriptive text and explained IGA, all of students to be calm, paid attention and more interested for a while. Sometimes, students tended to be passive in discussion, and they were shy when they were asked to practice it in front of the class what had been explained before.

b) Second meeting

In the second meeting, the researcher gave more explanation about descriptive text and technique using IGA. In this session, the students continued what they had been practice about descriptive text. Some students were difficult practiced about it, but the researcher gave the motivation to the students in order not shy to practice it.

c) Third meeting

In the third meeting, the students were given post-test. The purpose of post test 1 was to know how far the students' improvement of speaking ability using IGA. The students' scores were increased, but some of them that increased from pre test 59.8 in the post test 69.8. And its improvement could be seen from table below :

4) Reflecting the Action

After analyzing the observation result in the cycle one, the researcher did reflection in order to evaluate the teaching and learning she did so far. Based on the observation, the researcher concluded that the English learning process using IGA did not run well. But there was improvement of students' achievement than before. It could be seen from the score of the post test 1.

Nevertheless, the improvement of the students' scores of speaking ability was not satisfying enough since there were still some students who had less attention. But the researcher found several positive results and some weakness from the first cycle. They were as follows:

a) Positive result

- (1) The students were active to practice the material using IGA than before without IGA.
- (2) They were likely to share their ideas and work together to maximize their own and each other's learning in a cooperative attitude.
- (3) There was an improvement of the students' speaking ability. It was seen from the result of the post-test 1 that was 69.8. It was higher than the mean score of pre test 60.0.

b) Weakness

- (1) Some students could not communicate well.
- (2) The students still had mispronunciations and less fluency in delivering the story using IGA.
- (3) Some students looked ashamed to speak in front of class.

From the result of the reflection above, it could be concluded that the action in the first cycle resulted was not satisfying. So, the researcher decided to take the second cycle in order to make better improvement to the students' speaking ability.

Report of Cycle 2

1) Revised planning

In the cycle 2, the researcher tried to overcome the problems. The researcher decided to create activities which stimulate all of the students to participate in the teaching learning process. Besides, the researcher was necessary to make approaches to the students who are still ashamed. Then the researcher also planned to more pay attention to the pronunciation and the comprehension of the students. The researcher came to the students' discussion group and asked them about the difficult word and checked the pronunciation.

2) Implementing the Action Research

In the first and second meeting, the researcher did the same process as the first cycle including: Opening, main activity and closing. These meetings discussed one topic. In the third meeting the students did the post test 2. The post test 2 was held to know the students' achievements in speaking ability after they had been given two cycle of treatment.

Observing

In the first meeting of the cycle 2, the students looked enthusiastic in following the teaching learning process. The students paid more attention and became more active. Moreover they looked happy and enjoyed to follow the teaching learning process. The researcher conducted post-test 2. This post-test was held to know the improvement of students' achievement in speaking ability after giving treatments in the cycle 2. Based on the result of the post-test 2, there were improvements of students' mean score. The mean of the students's core improved in the post-test 2. The mean score increased from 69.8 in post-test 1 up to 77.1 in post-test 2. In post-test 2 the mean score has been increased to 7.3. It showed that the application of IGA improved students' speaking ability.

Reflecting the action

Reflection was done after analyzing the observation result either from the first meeting or from the second meeting. Based on the observation result, there were improvements toward the students. They were enthusiastic and more active during teaching and learning process.

The post-test was conducted on Tuesday 7 December, 2021. The result showed that there were improvements toward the score. The mean score of post-test 2 was 77.1 The more detailed result could be seen from the table below:

NO	NAME	POST TEST 1	POST TEST 2	PASS/FAIL
1	TD	55	75	Pass
2	TH	70	80	Pass
3	PH	65	75	Pass
4	TL1	60	70	Fail
5	TL	70	75	Pass
6	KN	75	80	Pass
7	TP	80	85	Pass
8	TT	75	80	Pass
9	AT	80	85	Pass
10	HT1	85	85	Pass
11	HT2	55	70	Fail
12	KT	50	65	Fail
13	BV	85	85	Pass
14	QN	80	85	Pass
15	HG	75	80	Pass
16	VH	50	55	Fail
17	DH1	85	85	Pass
18	DH2	85	85	Pass
19	TL2	70	75	Pass
20	QN	55	70	Fail
21	TQ	80	85	Pass
22	TT1	55	65	Fail
23	QN	60	75	Pass
24	TN	75	80	Pass
25	TT _r	85	85	Pass
26	TT2	55	70	Fail
SUM		1815	2005	
MEAN		69.8	77.1	

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1. To what extent do IGA improve English speaking of students in English speaking class?

There were some elements according to Harmer (1998, p. 266-271) which is considered to score as follows; grammar, vocabulary, comprehension and fluency. Based on the students' score above, there was improvement in the cycle. But only 8 students passed in the first post test. Then the researcher did cycle 2 to reapply IGA in speaking learning process. There were improvement achievements in post test cycle 2. Most of students passed in post test, only seven students who failed. The students could increase their scores and they were successful on speaking. It indicated that implementation of using IGA could improve speaking ability.

Based on the explanation above, the researcher concluded that there was improvement in student's achievement. The implementation of IGA in teaching speaking could also improve the students' speaking ability of the class.

3.2.2. What difficulties do teachers encounter while applying IGA in teaching English speaking skills?

Learning English speaking is significantly challenging to a majority of Vietnamese learners due to significant differences between the two language systems. Ur (2000) classified learners' speaking difficulties into four main categories which are:

- 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, learners find it easier or more natural to express themselves in their native language.

As in the teachers' observations, the above situations occurred in traditional language classrooms regardless of the level of proficiency or the number of students in the group. However, in the IGA lessons, students rarely encountered these problems because they were introduced carefully how they worked in their activities. It is said that teacher might meet some challenges such as: limited teaching resources, limited time for lecture.

As in documents applied in the study, the teacher may use extra-books/ topics outside the textbook for their attentive teaching. For this study, the researcher had to replan the lessons using IGA and got the positive results. While applying IGA, students were keen on speaking with their friends without time consuming. Teachers allowed them to work in the break time.

It is concluded that there were a few difficulties for teacher in applying IGA in his teaching speaking skills.

4. Conclusion

In the context of the study, the information gap activities had a positive effect on students' motivation in class. Students in the class with the use of information gap activities seemed to feel interested more in the lesson and engaged actively in the class. They were aware of the benefits that IGA can bring to them. Students felt that IGA could help them to improve their speaking skill and created a relaxed environment for them to practise speaking in class.

Using Information Gap Activities technique can improve the students speaking ability. It can be seen from the result of pre test and post test' mean score. Based on the result of mean score on pre test is 59.8. After the researcher teaches speaking by using implementation puppet, the students' mean score become 69.80 in post test 1. Then in post test 2, the students' mean score improves to be 77.1.

The teacher or researcher met a few challenges while using IGA in teaching speaking lessons. They might be aware the appropriate activities that will be used in teaching learning process. They also should have good preparation before applying the use of IGA and choosing resources for their lessons.

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BIO

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When she's not in the balckboard, Diep Anh is a mountain biker and loves spending time in the great outdoors.