

IMPROVING THE STUDENTS' SPEAKING PERFORMANCE THROUGH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF TIERED ACTIVITIES

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Abstract

This study aims at implementing differentiated instruction in the form of tiered activities to the students of Government Study Program, Faculty of Social and Political Studies, Yogyakarta Muhammadiyah University. There are three objectives in this study; 1) to give contribution in improving students' speaking performance and to solve the problems that the students have in terms of their readiness in the selected Free Conversation class, 2) to provide new activities which can be used as a consideration to evaluate the current material provided by the institution, 3) to provide related language instructors new insight and experience in applying a certain kind of approach, that is the use of differentiated instruction through tiered activities. 19 students from Class IP A2 who were taking the Free Conversation class were the participants of this study. The study was started by conducting observation, pre-test, and need analysis. Then, it was followed by the implementation and post-test. To measure the success of this study, pre-test and post-test scores were compared. The result indicated that the implementation of the tiered activities in Free Conversation class helped to improve the students' speaking performance.

Keywords: differentiated instruction, tiered activities, free conversation

1. INTRODUCTION

The curriculum of the English language learning in Yogyakarta Muhammadiyah University, a private university in Indonesia, requires the students to excel in their speaking skills as speaking is one of the language skills which must be mastered by the English language learners. Speaking is considered as one of the productive skills or active skills which demand the students to be able to use the language as a means of communication. It is a productive skill that can be directly and empirically observed, the observations are invariably covered by the accuracy and effectiveness of the learners' listening skill (Brown 2004). According to Richards (2008), the mastery of speaking skill in English is a priority for many second-language or foreign-language learners. Consequently, learners often evaluate their success in language learning as well as the effectiveness of their English course on the basis of how much they feel they have improved in their spoken language proficiency. In addition to this, Thornbury (2005) adds that speaking is part of learners' daily life. It shows that speaking is actually close to the learners.

However, the speaking mastery in Yogyakarta Muhammadiyah University is still far from being satisfactory, particularly the speaking mastery of those who are in the Free Conversation class. Being a transition class from the level-based course, Free Conversation class experienced the disparity of the speaking skill mastery of the students. Some of the students already had good speaking mastery. Meanwhile,

the rests varied from low into moderate and average which resulted in their engagement and involvement in the classroom activity. The students with good speaking mastery tended to dominate the teaching and learning activity while the others seemed to be overpowered and insecure. As a result, the students did not have equal chances to improve their speaking skills because the students with good speaking mastery became very active in the classroom and the students with lower speaking mastery remained quiet and silent. Therefore, to cope with the differences among the students, differentiated instruction in the form of tiered activities was employed.

The objectives of the study were: 1) to give contribution in improving students' speaking performance and to solve the problems that the students have in terms of their readiness in the selected Free Conversation class, 2) to provide new activities which can be used as a consideration to evaluate the current material provided by the institution, 3) to provide related language instructors new insight and experience in applying a certain kind of approach, that is the use of differentiated instruction through tiered activities. Thus in the study, the researchers only focus on the research question as follows: Can speaking skills be improved by using the implementation of tiered activities?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Differentiated Instruction

Robinson, Maldonado, and Whaley (2014) explain that differentiated instruction is a way of teaching which helps the students to be able to reach a common goal, regardless the differences that they employ (Robinson, *et al*, 2014). Differentiated instruction is meant to teach the students with various learning needs in the same classroom together (Nordlund, 2003). It is regarded as a type of instruction which addresses effective learning for varied individuals, gives the students to learn at their full potential, and develops instructional activities based on the students' diversity as well as displays multiple ways to learning (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006; Gregory & Chapman, 2013; Heacox, 2012). Differentiated instruction allows students to start learning from the appropriate level based upon their prior knowledge and allows them to begin building deeper meanings and understanding from the content (Hogan, 2009). It is created based on what is essential in the learning, attending to student differences, teacher/student collaboration regarding learning expectations, and uniting assessment and instruction (Logan, 2011).

In differentiated instruction, the instruction or the teaching and learning process is established to meet the students' needs and to be relevant for each student according to their different characteristics by bridging their individual differences into a meaningful learning. It is supported by Tomlinson (2000) who states that differentiated instruction provides an instruction and learning activities that are interesting and relevant for each student which allow them to experience many different roles and settings. In addition, Butt and Kausar (2010) add that differentiated instruction is a way of planning an instruction, so that one lesson can be taught to the entire class while meeting the individual needs of each student in the classroom.

There are many ways that can be used in differentiating a lesson. The teachers can select strategies to differentiate the lesson, for instance, they can differentiate the lesson based on the content, process, product, and learning environment (Tomlinson, 2001). Moreover, Campbell (2009) claims that in differentiated

instruction, we can differentiate the resources, the ways the students interact with others, and the way the students demonstrate learning. Other than that, the lesson can also be distinguished according to their levels of readiness, interests, and background knowledge (Robinson, Maldonado, & Whaley, 2014).

In brief, it can be inferred that differentiated instruction is a way of delivering a meaningful learning by taking into account the students' individual differences. It can be done by differentiating the content, process or the product in the lesson. Differentiated instruction is essential to be implemented because it meets the students with different and mixed-ability to be able to meet the common goal set for them and it allows the students to learn according to their differences, such as levels of readiness and interests.

2.2 Tiered Activities

One of the most commonly used techniques which can be used in distinguishing a lesson or instruction in order to meet the needs of the students is by designing tiered tasks for the students. Tiered task, or often referred to as tiered assignment is a way of delivering an instruction differently on the students without neglecting the objectives of the lesson that they have to achieve. Lewis and Batts (2005) define tiered assignments as the assignments designed at different levels of complexity according to students' level of readiness. In line with this statement, Johnson (2001) implies that tiered task is a situation in which the students learn about the same concept or skill but they learn in differing levels of complexity and sophistication. Richards and Omdal (2007) indicate that in tiered activity the students are gathered based on their background knowledge in a particular subject area. Hence, it is prepared by the teacher as a respond to the students' specific learning needs with a specific purpose (Heacox, 2009). As a final point, tiered activities can be utilized to bridge the differences between the students' readiness and prior background knowledge as well as provide them the chance to participate actively during learning to make the lesson more meaningful for them.

3. METHODS

3.1 Instruments

The instruments were divided into two categories, instruments to collect the data and the instrument to implement the project. The instruments used in collecting the data were pre-test and post-test, questionnaires, and observation checklist. The instruments used in implementing the project were scoring rubric, handouts, videos, and authentic texts. The instruments were previously tested in term of their validity and reliability. The researcher tested them by using peer-reviews and experts' judgment. The peer-reviews were done several times with other researchers.

3.2 Data Collection Technique

The data were in the form of quantitative data and qualitative data. The data about the students' needs were collected through the use of questionnaire, classroom observation, and test. The data about students' improvement were obtained through pre-testing and post-testing.

3.3 Setting

The project was implemented at Language Training Centre of Yogyakarta Muhammadiyah University. The schedule of the project was from 11 April 2017 until 28 April 2017. The implementations were done in 11 April, 18 April, 21 April, and 25 April 2017.

3.4 Participants

The participants were 19 students of Government Study Program, Faculty of Social and Politics Studies, Yogyakarta Muhammadiyah University. The students were in the fourth semester of their study at the university and they attended Free Conversation class twice a week. The English competence of the participants ranged from basic lower, basic upper, to intermediate.

3.5 Procedure

At the beginning of the project, need analysis was conducted to investigate the needs of the learners. The need analysis was used as a starting point to design the materials delivered in the project. After that, the course design, lesson plan, and materials were developed. It took three weeks to develop the items. Then the researchers tested the validity and reliability of the items. Next, pre-test was conducted to know the students competence before implementing the project. The implementation of the project lasted for several meetings before conducting the post-test. The last, the researchers conducted summarizing and evaluating parts.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After completing the implementation of the project for several meetings. The researchers then conducted a post-test in the form of speaking test. As the assessments, the post-test scores of the students then were compared and analyzed along with the pre-test scores. The detailed information about the scores can be seen from table below.

Table 1: Pre-test and Post-test Scores
Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean
Pretest	19	14.132
Posttest	19	15.816
Valid N (listwise)	19	

Statistics

	Name	Pretest	Posttest
N	Valid	19	19
	Missing	0	0
Mean		14.132	15.816
Minimum		10.0	12.0
Maximum		16.5	19.0
Sum		268.5	300.5

In this speaking test, there are five aspects which are measured. They are the fluency, pronunciation, communication, vocabulary, and grammar. To accommodate students' needs and their difference in background knowledge, tiered tasks were applied. Richards & Omdal (2007) point out that in tiered activity, the learners are grouped based on their background knowledge in a particular subject area. During the implementation, the students were gathered based on their readiness and prior background knowledge to work on different tasks. The tasks required the students to be actively participating in discussion. Here, the students were given the opportunities to practice their speaking skills. Therefore, through these group discussions and speaking activities, the students could improve their speaking skills, particularly in those five aspects. From the table of speaking skills assessment scores above, the mean score of students' speaking skills is 14.1 for pre-

test. Meanwhile, the post-test mean score is 15.8. Therefore, it is found that the mean score of the students' speaking skills has increased meaningfully. Accordingly, it indicates that the mean score increased after the implementation of the project using tiered task.

In addition, the evaluation process covers several items such as language content, skills practiced, feedback, stages in lessons, class management, and arrangement of materials. Those items are explained as follows:

4.1 Language Content

The language contents used in the course were telling and responding to real and imaginary situations and tell possibilities. Most of the students were able to grasp the meaning from the language contents. However, there were few students who still could not fully understand about the language contents. In addition, the students were given plenty opportunities to re-use the target language items. The students already used them to produce meaningful language even though it was not well structured. Finally, they were also given list of useful vocabularies and asked to take notes of some important points in the lesson.

4.2 Skills Practiced

The main skill of the lesson was speaking. However, the skills practiced were a combination of four skills rather than focusing only on speaking. This is because the comprehensible inputs given were in the form of written texts, audios and videos. The tasks given were based on tiered activities. The researchers grouped the students based on their present knowledge. Thus, the tasks given were differentiated. In doing the tasks, it was noticed that the students were enjoying the activities. Furthermore, this could be seen from their enthusiasm in practicing and completing the tasks. On the other hand, there were still mistakes produced by the students in using the target language. The mistakes dealt with grammar, pronunciation, intonation, and diction.

4.3 Feedback

The researchers delivered the feedback by the end of the students' performance. In term of the language accuracy, most of the students were still low even though they were already equipped with sufficient amount of comprehensible inputs. There was peer corrections occurring among the students even though the researchers did not encourage the students to do so.

4.4 Stages in Lessons

In staging the lessons, the researchers provided a lot of activities for the students. It came from the beliefs that the more the students practice the more they are able to speak. On the other hand, the numbers of instructions given to the students were not clear enough. Consequently, some of the students found it hard to do the activities.

4.5 Class Management

During the teaching learning activities, the researchers gave equal opportunities for the students to participate in the activities. However, not all of the students used that opportunities maximally. Some of them spoke very little throughout the activities. Additionally, some of the students in the classroom were still passive. Some of the students also still preferred to use their native language particularly when communicating with other students. In dealing with these problems, the researchers needed to encourage them to speak up by pointing at them as well as reminded the students to use English in the classroom. Lastly, the students were asked to summarize and gave reflection about the lesson in the end of the meeting.

4.6 Arrangement of Materials

The amount of the materials was too many. Furthermore, the vocabulary task was too difficult for their level. The instructions for the role play activity was not clear enough for the students. The authentic movie clip was too long and instead distracting the students rather than making them focus. Due to many materials provided in each meeting, the time planned could not accommodate the implementation of the materials. As a result, there was one extended meeting added in the project. This also caused the arrangement of the project to change. Additionally, the researchers needed to repeat the instructions several times until the students understood what they had to do.

5. CONCLUSION

The design of this tiered activities project for the Government Study Program students who were taking Free Conversation class provided more refreshing leaning activities to improve the students' speaking performance. The design also offered more challenges in term of problem solving tasks which relate the materials with real-life situation. From the result of the pre-test and post-test data comparison, there is an improvement in score in the students' speaking performance. On the other hand, the researchers also learned that designing lesson plans with the implementation of tiered activities is a complex matter. It involves several stages which requires the knowledge of English language teaching and learning, students' background knowledge, as well as the time management. Consequently, it is highly recommended to design the tiered activities lesson plan carefully.

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