TEACHING ENGLISH TO LARGE MULTILEVEL CLASSES MAJORING IN MATH, BIOLOGY AND CHEMISTRY BY USING ‘BURST THE BALLOON’ AND ‘TALKING CHIPS’ TECHNIQUES

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Abstract: English for Math, Biology, and Chemistry Departments is meant as ESP which more or less trains the students to be able to master the four language skills in the academic context such as expressing opinions, delivering a presentation, having a group discussion, etc. One of the skills, speaking, is quite difficult to do in the situation where the number of the students is more than one hundred in every session. Based on the teacher’s preliminary observation from a presentation conducted during a session, the students of Math, Biology and Chemistry Departments are basically able to use English although their levels of proficiency are various. By adopting ‘Burst the Balloon’ technique suggested by Natalie Hess (2010) in dealing with large multilevel classes and ‘Talking Chips’ technique, the students can be stimulated to do an active speaking activity during the session. The significance of the activities is giving opportunities for each student to practice speaking English in a conducive and enjoyable circumstances. The success or failures of the techniques are assessed in terms of teacher’s observation and students’ opinion from the questionnaire.

Keywords: burst the balloon, talking chips, speaking

Three departments –majoring Math, Biology, and Chemistry– in the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education usually require English as a compulsory subject. English for Math, Biology, and Chemistry Departments is meant as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) which more or less trains the students to be able to master the four language skills in the academic context such as expressing opinions, delivering a presentation, having a group discussion, etc. One of the skills, speaking, is quite difficult to do in the situation where the number of the students is more than one hundred in every session. Based on the teacher’s preliminary observation from a presentation conducted during a session, the students of Math, Biology and Chemistry Departments are basically able to ‘use’ English although their levels of proficiency are various.

Being able to speak in English is not an easy task; however, facilitating and stimulating the non-English Departments students to use English orally is a lot more difficult. Therefore it is the task of the teacher to be able to trigger their students to speak in English. Teacher’s choices of approach, method and techniques in the teaching and learning process might be determined by the experiences of the teacher. However, the choices might apply either one or some of the twelve principles of language learning and teaching by Brown (2007:63-81). Those principles are categorized into cognitive, socio-affective, and linguistics principles. Six of the twelve principles is under the cognitive one; the rest six principles are three for socio-affective and three for linguistics principles.

The first six principles which belong to cognitive one are automaticity, meaningful learning, the anticipation of reward, intrinsic motivation, strategic investment, and autonomy. Automaticity means that the fluent use of the target language is automatic. Meaningful learning is defined as the process of making meaningful connection between existing knowledge/experience and new material that will bring long-term learning rather than the rote one. The anticipation of reward means that teacher anticipates to give some sort of reward. Intrinsic motivation is the students’ motivation which should be maintained by the teacher through the classroom’s atmosphere. Strategic investment is that teacher is showing a wide variety of styles and strategies in the teaching and learning process. Autonomy is meant as teacher’s effort in providing opportunities for the students to take initiatives inside and beyond the classroom.

Socio-affective principles covers language ego, willingness to communicate and language-culture connection. Language ego is owned by all language learners, and teacher should give help for the students to handle confusion between ‘old’ and ‘new’ languages. Willingness to communicate is encouraged by the teacher in order that the students are willing to initiate communication. Language-culture connection is when the teacher involves complex system of cultural customs, values, and ways of thinking, and acting in the teaching and learning process of the target language.

The three principles –the native language effect, interlanguage, and communicative competence– are the linguistics principles. The native language effect is meant as the teacher’s understanding of the students’ native language system which might facilitate and/or interfere the target language learning. Interlanguage is a
situation when the teacher regards errors due to interlanguage as ways to provide appropriate feedback. Communicative competence means that instruction is needed to facilitate the components of communicative competence.

Based on those twelve principles, the application of both techniques ‘burst the balloon’ and ‘talking chips’ are evaluated after they are implemented in English class of students majoring in Math, Biology and Chemistry. Widiati & Nurhayati (2011) stated that those principles form basic, fundamental building blocks for teaching, to be used to evaluate everything from the general approaches to the details of minute-by-minute teacher and student behaviors in the classroom. By adopting ‘Burst the Balloon’ technique suggested by Natalie Hess (2010) in dealing with large multilevel classes and ‘Talking Chips’ technique, the students can be stimulated to do an active speaking activity during the session.

The purpose of the study is activities is giving opportunities for each student to practice speaking English in a conducive and enjoyable circumstances. The success or failures of the techniques are assessed in terms of teacher’s observation and students’ opinion from the questionnaire.

**Methods**

This study is a self-report research. The instruments of the study are observation sheet and questionnaire. The first type of instruments covered the observations by the researcher and two observers; moreover, the participants are to fill out the questionnaire. Two English sessions applied the two techniques; the first one is session for Burst the Balloon activity and two weeks after that Talking Chips was implemented in the class. There were 237 and 280 students involved in the first and second sessions–May 8th and May 21st 2014–when the two techniques were conducted in the teaching and learning process.

After some adaptations, Burst the Balloon activity by Natalie Hess requires some steps. Firstly, before the sessions, the teacher should prepare pieces of paper shaped like a balloon. For this study 50 pieces of colorful balloon-shaped paper were prepared due to the number of the students. In the classroom, it started by calling 50 students to help attaching the balloon paper on the wall around the classroom. Next, all students were asked to prepare pieces of paper (3 x 3 cm). Each student must have 6 pieces. Then, they should write down letter Y and N on the paper. Three pieces for Y and three pieces for N. After that, the students go around the class and read the statements on the balloon paper. If they agree or disagree, they should attach the Y or N paper around the balloon paper. All students must spend their Y and N paper. While mingling with their friends, they may talk or argue the opinion in English. After all students have spent their Y and N paper, each of them must stand next to a balloon paper form groups. Then, students work in groups discussing why the majority of the answers is a YES or a NO. In plenary, each group must present their arguments after a few minutes.

The procedure of Talking Chip activity was adapted from Kagan through the website http://www.kaganonline.com/free_articles/dr_spencer_kagan/281/Kagan-Structures-A-Miracle-of-Active-Engagement,3. The activity simply started by making sure that each student receives two “talking chips.” The chips are made from colorful paper which are shaped circular, square, rectangular, hearted, etc. Smiley or emoticon should be drawn by the owner of the chip to make it more interesting. Then, the students were given an open-ended discussion topic related to Character Education. In order to speak, a teammate must place his or her chip in the center of the team table. Teammates cannot interrupt and must practice respectful listening. When he or she has finished, another student places his or her chip in the center of the team table and is free to add to the discussion. When a student uses his or her “talking chip”, he or she cannot speak until all teammates have added to the discussion and placed their chip in the center of the table. When everyone has had a chance to speak, each student collects her or his chips and continues with the discussion, using “talking chips” or start again with a new topic. The general discussion was done in the post activity.

**Findings**

The comments from the students were mostly constructive although there are some of which are unsupportive. The students comments to describe the teaching and learning process by using ‘Burst the Balloon’ and ‘Talking Chips’ techniques can be seen in the Appendix. Drawn from the comments, it might be seen that almost all of the students consider that the lesson on both days was fun. There are 323 positive individual comments about the lesson made by 237 students who were present on the day when Burst the Balloon was conducted. Most of the comments from the groups which give comment on the lesson by Talking Chips. Based on the two observers’ comment and the researcher’s reflection, there are more good things happened on the days of both techniques were implemented.

**Discussion**

**Automaticity**

Both techniques, however, obliged the students to be active and think fast. Each of them has to participate expressing his/her ideas orally in the group in order that the discussion, interaction and idea sharing
ran smoothly. Most importantly, they could freely state their opinion without being worried that the teacher will correct or give punishment on all the mistakes they make because the teacher was not always around them. This type of ‘freedom’ might lead to the students to use English automatically although it is not ‘perfect’ English.

**Meaningful Learning**

Ten students stated that they learn something while playing during Burst the Balloon, and one person agreed that the technique of Talking Chip is attractive enough as a study strategy and game for playing. Since the students consider that they feel like they were playing, it means that they will remember the memorable things during the implementation of the techniques. In other words, the learning might be meaningful if the students keep the memory on what they have learnt, and in the future they might apply what they have known or practiced.

**The Anticipation of Reward**

Reward or reinforcement is necessary to motivate the students. The extra score given during Burst the Balloon activity is actually meant to encourage the students to be active and able to speak in front of the floor. Nevertheless, due to the excessive number of the students, the number of participation is not equal and fairly distributed. The teacher should have anticipated the most possible trick of giving the reward which was not well-managed during the sessions because some students consider that the way the reward was given is unfair and, in another occasion, the idea was not a speaker’s ideas but his/her friend’s. There was not reward anticipation in the Talking Chips activity.

**Intrinsic Motivation**

In term of motivation, both activities has been successful increasing almost all of the students’ motivation. The students admitted that the activities were fun, interesting, good, enjoyable, relaxing, amazing, wonderful, cool, unforgettable, creative, awesome, inspiring, fantastic, unpredictable, useful, beneficial, and effective; did not bore them; made them feel happy and excited; and made the materials easy to understand. The activities also made the lecture on both days less tense, so the techniques lessened the students’ nervousness. Some unsupportive comments are only saying that the activities were tiring and they also make the classroom noisy because there were too many people that caused the room became hot and crowded. Therefore, those conditions tend to turn the lesson into ineffective and lower the students’ motivation.

**Strategic Investment**

The two strategies applied in the teaching and learning process brought about various opinion of the students, observers and the teacher herself. The reflection that can be made is that both techniques are different sets of English learning activities which are innovative and creative. Through the use of the good strategies, the new knowledge of materials can easily be understood by the students because it facilitates students with various learning styles with activities that require reading, listening and moving around. In addition, the material or the topics are authentic, important and beneficial because they happen in life. Most importantly both strategies activated students’ speaking skills.

The unsupportive opinion is probably related to the instruction of steps in implementing the techniques. Since there are some steps to follow, instructing each step needs an effort because there are a lot of individuals to be made understood of what they are supposed to do. Some students did not really get the instruction, and they just followed their friends. Thus, it must be noted down that instruction is quite requiring a careful attention in employing both techniques. Extremely, some students stated that both are not great methods with a lot of people or in other word they not effective, inefficient and time costly. Other concluded that it is not suitable for college students. Hence, it is important to believe that there must be weaknesses among strengths.

**Autonomy**

Both techniques exposes students to autonomy learning which stresses on the team work during the classroom. The students might be required and may realize to be good listeners and give their opinion on their own orally whether when they mingled or when they were seated with their group. Teacher’s control is very limited especially for this ‘very big’ class. They must be able stand on their own in making sure that they follow the procedure instructed. Beyond the classroom work is summarizing and concluding their opinion.

**Language Ego**

This principle was at the minimum level when the activities were carried out. Almost all of the students are passionate enough to use English since it is for them to practice and the circumstances were supporting and obliged them to do so. The confusion occurred only when they do not know the English words for certain terms. Assistance came from the teacher and friends.
Willingness to Communicate

In terms of situation, it really conditioned the students to speak up because the techniques are fun and challenging. It might be stimulating to talk with acquaintances whom they met for the first time because they were randomly grouped between three departments. Moreover, they wanted to give a ‘nice-first’ impression to those new buddies. Besides meeting persons whom they have not known before, it might be possible that they met old high-school friends who are probably studying the same or different major. Sometimes although the students are from similar department, they might not know their friends because their classes are separated, Class A and B. The willingness to communicate was high during Burst the Balloon session actually geared the students to speak in plenary although it is triggered by the reinforcement of getting an extra score. However, the positive effect is that everybody, even though it is mostly dominated by fluent students, is willing to talk in front of the floor.

Language-Culture Connection

Working individually and a boring English lesson had been in the students’ mind because the teacher rarely activate their cooperative skills in doing the tasks in the classroom. The use of both techniques might a bit change the mindset about it. Therefore, the culture of solitude learning might be substituted by cooperative learning. It is also implicitly taught that teachers can be explorative in applying various techniques to produce an effective teaching and learning.

The Native Language Effect

Based on the researchers’ observation from both techniques, native language of the students played a role. However, the use of Banjarese –most of the students’ native tongue– has been heard during Burst the Balloon activity when the students moved around, discussing one to another topics / questions. During the second activity, Talking Chips, it is heard but less frequent because the activity focused on the use of English within the small group.

Interlanguage

The appropriate feedback given by the teacher in term of interlanguage was only when the students mispronounced some words during the plenary. The mispronunciation tends to be the influence of the mother tongue.

Communicative Competence

The lesson taught the students on how to give and respond to opinion. During the teaching and learning process, the teacher has explained the appropriate forms to use to cover the grammatical and sociolinguistic competence of the English language on that topics. The appropriate communication strategies is also given for example the use fillers (ie. ehm, okay, yeah, etc.),while listening to other giving or responding an opinion. The students’ comments which review and reflect the teaching and learning process confirmed that their communicative competence is facilitated through both activities.

Conclusions and Suggestions

The skill to give and respond to opinion is important for college students. Both techniques ‘Burst the Balloon’ and ‘Talking Chips’ are good because they made everyone tried to speak English and give their opinion in a relaxing situation. The lesson was great because the students are taught to listen and to concentrate in order to understand their friends speaking in English. It is useful because it can improve our English speaking skill especially in giving opinion. The students really expect that this innovative technique can be continuously used and elaborated.

Some unfavorable comments were about the physical condition of the classroom. It was hot and crowded. In addition, the number of the students are disproportionate. It was more than 200 students. As a result, it must be concluded that it is not very appropriate number although the challenge in the beginning was to manage a ‘big’ classroom with communicative or speaking activities. In further research, the number of the students must really be a consideration.

Burst the Balloon and Talking Chips regulate discussion, ensuring that everyone participates and everyone contributes. Shy students, low achievers, and less-fluent students are encouraged by the social norms of the structure to fully participate and develop their language skills, too.
References


