

Bridging the Gaps among Mixed Ability Students to Create Conducive Atmosphere in Learning English through Various Communication Activities

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Abstract

The research aimed to get a descriptive account of collaborative communication activities which can bridge the gaps in the view of the students and classroom condition which creates conducive atmosphere in learning English. This research applied qualitative explorative research taking the second semester students of English Literature Program at Fajar University Makassar as the purposive sample. The data were collected through Myres-Briggs online questionnaire, in depth interview, and classroom observation. The results of data analysis showed that (1) the collaborative communication activities which can bridge the students' gaps in their perspectives should be fun and collaborative. The varied activities can be applied alternately in learning interaction and adjusted with the material taught with attractive teaching media. In accordance with the gap issue, it was also found that the gap was caused by distinctive personality and personal interests, and (2) there are some classroom conditions in students' point of view which can create conducive atmosphere physically and psychologically in learning English including the good condition of the classroom, the existence of the class attribute, and the other factors namely the lecturers, friends, motivation, and satisfaction.

Keywords: Gap, collaborative communication activities, conducive atmosphere, classroom condition.

Introduction

Students are one of perennial elements of EFL teaching and learning. In addition, all of them have different identity, background, personality, motivation, ability, and so on. Most of students who come with those different factors are included in mixed ability students. Likewise teaching mixed ability students is challenging for some lecturers. Mixed ability or 'heterogeneous' classes are terms used to describe classes made up of students of different levels of proficiency. Prior to this description, the class which was researched is mixed ability students as well.

Furthermore, teaching heterogeneous class is much more challenging than teaching homogenous class. As it has distinctive factors, sometimes the gaps occurred during teaching and learning process. For instance the high achievers tend to be more enthusiastic, extroverted, talkative, confident, and active to get high scores or the lecturers' attention compared to the low achievers who tend to act the vice versa. While typical problem such as family background, feeling lazy, introverted owing to lack of progress also become the other factors. Hence the factors mentioned trigger the gaps within the classes and make the atmosphere of the class is not conducive.

However, the researcher only focused on personality factor as one of the causes of the gaps occurred in the class. Theoretically, the personality test will be conducted based on Myres-Briggs test result to get objective information about their personality. It indicates that there are personality type indicators which commonly referred to as the "Myres-Briggs test" questionnaire. It includes 1) introversion versus extroversion, 2) sensing versus intuition, 3) Thinking versus feeling, 4) judging versus perceiving. Every personality has its own strategies in learning process.

The harmony and the conducive environment perceived by the students really affect the teaching and learning process. Therefore, the classroom management which has a conducive atmosphere plays an important role for the students during learning especially in EFL classroom. Motivations, interests, and needs are widely recognized as important factors in language learning success. It is important for lecturers to create a relaxed, positive atmosphere in the classroom to create a good learning situation. In order to create a good environment in learning process, it is essential for the lecturers to form a good relationship between themselves and the students.

The gaps occurring among the students in learning process is a destructive matter especially in the respondents' class at Fajar University. As communication is one of basic functions of necessary classroom management concerning about the necessity to instruct students what is expected of them. Thus, it should be engaged in various collaborative communication activities in a group or in pair formation.

Research Problems

This research was intended to answer the following question:

1. What collaborative communication activities will bridge the gaps among mixed ability students in learning interaction in regard to the students' point of view?
2. What classroom condition in students' point of view will create conducive atmosphere in learning English to bridge the gaps among the students?

Literature Review

Gap

Gap means: a). an opening or a break in something or between two things; b). an empty interval of time or space; c). a difference that separates people's opinions, development, etc; d). a lack of something that is needed. Meanwhile bridging the gap means to fill an awkward or empty space and to reduce the distance (between two very different groups) (Crowther, 1995). Referring to this term, Retana (2011) studied about "the Achievement Gap of English Language Learners". In this case, she focused on the achievement gap concerning about a difference that separates people's development in achievement. The background factors causing the gap were the development of second language acquisition, immigration status, socioeconomic conditions,

parental engagement, status, and race/ethnicity. However in this research the gap only focuses on its occurrence during learning interaction.

Classroom Management

In teaching and learning process, the lecturer acts as a manager in managing the class. Sivalingam (2009) stated that classroom management is a pivotal linchpin to ensure an effective teaching and learning to take place in promoting a favorable mood or atmosphere in the classroom. Class management plays an important role in enhancing students' motivation, attracting their attention, and creating good inspiration for the students. The management really depends on how the lecturer as the manager organizes the classroom settings including the student's involvement, the materials, seating arrangement and class participation.

Learning interaction

Collaborative and good atmosphere in learning interaction should be there in order to improve students' involvement one another in understanding each lesson. According to Larsen and Freeman (1986: 131) the teacher is a facilitator of his students' learning. As such he/she has many roles to fulfill. He is a manager of classroom activities in which his responsibility is to establish situation likely to promote communication in learning interaction. Moreover communication strategies as the main issue can be alternative activities which prompt the students to work together and to find out some new ideas in solving the task or to help the low achiever students in understanding the assignments given by the lecturer.

Thus, in giving the task Tomlinson (1998) suggested that dealing with the term of assignment or 'task' which commonly encountered to meaning-focused work, such as projects, problem-solving, and simulations, there are three key aspects of giving those tasking for instance

by noticing a) A process which students and teachers are to go, b) classroom participation concerning with whom (if anyone) the students are to work, and c) contents that the students are to focus on. In performing the assignment given to the students, the key aspects can be elaborated by managing the classroom into pair work, group work, even individual work.

Mixed ability class

Mixed ability class consists of distinctive background factors. Svard (2006) revealed that according to the teachers who were interviewed, the best way to deal with the problem is to bring back ability grouping. The differentiation and motivation instead in managing the mixed ability classroom were found in the literature they read. A good atmosphere, clear instructions, structure and setting routines were claimed from both the literature and the teachers. They were categorized as the most important factors when working with this kind of class.

Communication activities

In general, Johnson & Marketa (1999: 4) pointed out that communication is an ongoing process of sending and receiving messages that enable humans to share knowledge, attitudes, and skills. While communication activities can engage the students to be more interactive and cooperative in the classroom. Lewis, et. al, (1961) in his research entitled *An analysis of classroom patterns of communication*, and the results of the study indicated that classroom interaction has a series of communication acts namely verbal and non-verbal between teachers and students. Some activities can be engaged in the classroom, and the teacher can give any instructions by implementing any communication acts which are suitable with the condition.

Personality

Every person has different personality. In addition it influences human's attitude and behavior in daily life. In 1923, to find out the kinds of personality, Carl Jung set up the

questionnaires called the Myres-Briggs test. There had been a tremendous ways of interests in Western society at that time, in the relationship between personality type and one's success in a career, management of time, academic pursuits, in marriage, in child rearing, and in other contexts. The test can find out their personality description in detail (Brown, 2000)

Method

Research Method & Data analysis

This research employed the explorative research design in qualitative approach. It described the students' perspectives on collaborative communication activities and classroom condition they prefer to reduce the gap among them. In line with this, Gay et al. (2006) argued that descriptive research is useful for investigating a variety of educational problems and issues. He also defined a qualitative research as the collection, analysis, and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual (non-numerical) data in order to gain insights into a particular phenomenon of the interest.

The population of this research consisted of the second semester students of English literature department at Fajar University. The researcher chose only one class consisting of 13 active students as the representatives of the research subject due to a case study concerning about the gaps. Furthermore, this class was chosen because they had completed their English subjects on the first semester and the researcher believed that the gap sometimes occurred in this class especially in learning interaction.

The information obtained from the preliminary study performed through the previous observation and interview. The sample of the research was purposive sampling technique. According to Gay et al. (2006) it is believed to be representative in selecting a sample of a given

population. It means that the researcher purposively selected the participants. The third semester students were chosen because the researcher believes that the gap occurred in the classroom should be bridged to create conducive atmosphere in learning.

Data Collection

The researcher employed four kinds of instruments namely online questionnaire, interview, observation, and documentation. The description is explained as follows:

Online questionnaire. The online questionnaire was used to gain the objective information about students' personality through "Myres-Briggs test". Moreover the respondents used their gadgets and did the test at <http://www.humanmetrics.com/cgi-win/jtypes2.asp>. The researcher explained what to do, asked them to finish the test in a few minutes, and submitted the result. It was conducted when the students had their spare time in lecture days and it obviously depended on the agreement between the researcher and the respondents.

Interview. In this study, the researcher used in-depth semi structured interview to the informants. The interviews were some open-ended questions which entailed recording in regard to various collaborative communication activities and conducive classroom conditions based on their perspectives. Besides, the interview related to classroom condition was referred to MCAP (My Classroom Assessment Protocol) which has been used in some International journals. The interview was also conducted in the students' spare time while waiting for the next lecture to study. Thus, it depended on the appointment made with the students.

Observation. Actually, the researcher conducted earlier observation for pre research by assuming that the gap was caused by different personality. However, the next observation was implemented due to different fact obtained during the research. This second observation aimed to

gain the data related to what kind of various communication activities applied by the lecture to be compared with the students' opinion. It was conducted during the lecture especially in speaking class at least three times.

Documentation. In line with observation, interview and questionnaire, information was also gathered through documentary evidence. The documents such as portfolio and files were helpful in verifying the substantial information of the students. Similarly, it could provide other specific details to corroborate information from other sources such as their achievement scores from the previous semester and specific lecture lesson plan. The researcher examined the files and portfolios concerning about the research.

Findings

This shows the findings of the data analysis of the data collected from online questionnaire, interviews and classroom observation to answer the research questions put forward in introduction.

Based on the data analysis obtained from in depth interview for the students individually in turn about the collaborative communication activities based on their perspectives, the researcher found some activities they preferred and the reasons for choosing them. Collaborative or cooperative way was the reason of choosing the activities. Besides the cheerful way and fun was categorized as another factor for the option of the activities.

The interview was supported by classroom observations, in which the researcher offered the activities to the lecturers who teach in the class. For example, in teaching speaking, role play was one of the method to make them cooperate one another. In role play, they can discuss what

today, group management, scene setting, deciding what to say and what to do, and so forth. The learning interaction among the mixed ability students seemed to work well. From those two instruments of the study, especially from the interview, the researcher found that which bridge the gaps among mixed ability students in learning interaction in regard to the students' perspectives are listed in the following table:

	Kinds of communication Activities	The number of the interviewees who prefer it	The reason for choosing the communication activity
1.	Ice breakers	7 interviewees	Collaborative and fun
2.	Story telling	5 interviewees	Collaborative
3.	Information gap	5 interviewees	Collaborative
4.	Role play	4 interviewees	Collaborative and fun
5.	ICT mediated communication activities	3 interviewees	Collaborative and fun
6.	Making group project	3 interviewees	Collaborative and fun
7.	Literacy development	2 interviewees	Collaborative
8.	The other (additional activities):		

	Discussion	5 interviewees	Collaborative
	Travelling / outdoor class activity	Interviewee	Collaborative and fun
	Study Club	Interviewee	Collaborative and fun
	Grouping in every lecturer with different friends	1 interviewee	Collaborative
	Outdoor assignments	1 interviewee	Collaborative and fun
	Debate	2 interviewees	Collaborative

Table 1: the collaborative communication activities preferred by the students

Moreover, there are some supporting ideas which support the collaborative communication activities such as learning interaction, students' profiles, and teaching media in reducing the gap. The researcher found that there were some classroom conditions in students' perspectives which can create conducive atmosphere in learning English as well. Meanwhile the classroom conditions include (1) the physical condition of the class, (2) the importance of the attribute of the class, (3) the other factors creating good atmosphere physically and psychologically, and (4) anticipating the class condition problems faced by the students. The discussion of these characteristics is given in the following lines.

Discussion

The Collaborative Communication Activities

Dealing with the interviews and classroom observations, the researcher found out that referring to the students' perspectives, there are some collaborative communication activities

which can reduce the gap among them. The researcher let the students choose some options provided about the communication activities. Likewise, the students were allowed to have their own suggestions about them. There are some communication activities which are offered by the researcher namely role play, information gap, jumbled story, problem solving, ice breakers, ICT mediated communication activities, story-telling, making group project, and literacy development.

Besides from observation conducted by using field note to compare the students' perspectives and the interview about collaborative communication activities implemented by the lecturer, it was revealed that the lecturer especially in speaking subject applied speaking practices individually for two meetings to talk about their experience and the meaning of best friend. In addition, in the other two meetings, the lecturer asked the students to do discussion under the title *"video game impact to the children"* and debate under the title *"Is Indonesia threatened by the existence of English?"*. While in the last two meetings, the lecturer asked the students to do story-telling and role play.

Furthermore, it was found that the collaborative communication activities preferred by the students can be done during learning interaction and outside of the class to make them more collaborative one another to minimize the gap among them.

Communicative activities cover various activities that encourage and engage learners to communicate and share with other students, and with community or people they meet in their daily life. It also has real aims in sharing information, breaking down barriers among them, and discussing about themselves and any issues around them. To assist the English classroom into an active, safe, and enjoyable place where literacy and beginners can study what they need and want

to study, the lecturer can offer well-designed and well-executed communicative activities in teaching and learning process

The enjoyable situation can make the students feel fun in learning and the gap among them can be reduced as well. The additional activities namely study club, outdoor class activity, discussion, debate, and so on can also be conducted outside of the classroom. They also have contributions in making the students to get closer one another.

In addition, it is also revealed that most of the students prefer learning in a group, because they can help and share one another. Since they have different preference in learning interaction, Rasyid and Muhayyang (2005) suggested some ways in managing the class namely: (1) Organizing the classroom space and time, (2) different student grouping (whole class, pair work and group work, team work, solo work, class-to-class), (3) different seating arrangement (orderly rows, circles and horseshoes, separate tables), and (4) Activities for each seating arrangement.

Besides, in giving the task or the assignment which commonly encountered to meaning-focused work, for instance projects, problem-solving, and simulations, there are three key aspects of giving those tasking such as: a) A process which are performed in the classroom interaction. It involves the opening, process, and closing of teaching and learning process; b) Classroom participation concerning with whom the students interact or do their assignments or tasks; c) Contents or the materials that the students learn.

Thus, in applying the task given to the students the key aspects can be elaborated by managing the classroom into pair work, group work, even individual work. It can be adjusted with the material which the lecturer is going to teach. The key aspects can be combined one another when teaching a subject inasmuch as the students have different interests in learning.

Furthermore, from the online questionnaire about personality test based on Myers-Briggs test, it was found that the students have different kind of personality. From the data obtained, it showed that the students have different personality. Surprisingly even though some of them have the same personality, but they don't gather in the same group. They have distinctive concerns for being interested in academic pursuit, social media, or personal interest. The personal interests entail the privacy problems, family cases, or social media topics to discuss. It was also obtained from the data that one of the students, who is high achiever, became the most favorite character in the class.

Mixed ability or 'heterogeneous' classes are terms used to describe classes made up of students of different levels, different strengths, weaknesses and approaches to learning. These characteristics were found in the class of the subject researched. Therefore, as the students have different strengths, learning style and interests, the lecturer can modify the variety of teaching. Thus by modifying the variety of teaching the different or the same personality can meet one another.

Furthermore, since the subject was in the mixed ability class, there are some strategies to notice for teaching them:

- 1) Conducive learning environment which can be managed by designing the classroom into comfortable place to see
- 2) Managing the classroom well during learning process,
- 3) Teaching students by considering about their different learning styles and their distinctive learning strategies for visual, auditory and kinesthetic ones,
- 4) Varying topics to teach, methods or strategies of teaching, focus, materials and activities to perform,

- 5) Grouping which be assigned in different ways with different people in every meeting for example pair work, group work, and whole class (mingles) since the class taught has the gap, it is important for the lecturer to know well how to choose the people of each group in random way.
- 6) Lecturers need to make the lessons attractive to learn in terms of content, topic and activities,
- 7) Getting students to work together when they are allowed to discuss in the group or pair work,
- 8) Providing opportunities for them to work at their own pace, in their own style when the task given individually,
- 9) Providing them with problem-solving, analysis, evaluation and synthesis activities, rather than only comprehension tasks to make use of higher order thinking skills by consulting their ideas with the lecturer or their partners in a group,
- 10) Open-endedness activities which can be done in the enjoyable ways,
- 11) Giving compulsory plus optional tasks which can be conducted indoor or outdoor ,
- 12) Adapting materials from the internet, novels, magazines or newspapers,
- 13) Giving assignment to evaluate the students' understanding of the material taught in the meeting.

Likewise, applying the plain teaching media makes the students bored in learning. Hence the creativity of the lecturer is demanded. Fun games which are inserted in power point or any other programs which look interesting influence the way the students grasp the lesson well.

Dealing with the appealing teaching media, differentiation in mixed ability class is needed in three areas of teaching. It is performed by considering about (1) the material taught which can be modified by using authentic articles, films, song lyrics, radio programs, short stories, role plays, poems and so on, (2) the process which means how the students engage the lessons and can be differentiated by using whole class discussions or debates, pair work task, group work projects, individual assignment etc., and (3) the product which includes the achievement the students show, for instance through a test or different kinds of presentations etc. The students cannot learn if they are unmotivated as they then feel it is inaccessible. Since we learn more when what is taught connects to our interests and our own way of learning.

Classroom condition

The physical condition of the class. Referring to the interview about classroom condition, it can be obtained that the physical condition of the class includes the temperature control, air quality, light quality, equipment order and quality, size, wall writing surface (whiteboard), and space for computers or laptops in the classroom. Most of the students think that they are in good condition except in specific occurrences. Furthermore, the effect of the weather's change occasionally influences the students when they learn i.e., if the air conditioner is broken or when there is heavy rain, its sound gets through the three-ply wall.

However overall it can be managed because the air conditioners are fixed and most of the walls of the building are made of bricks. It is line with the opinion of the researchers that building deficiencies impair the quality of teaching and learning and contribute to health and safety problems of staff and students. Building design and facility conditions have also been associated with lecturer motivation and student achievement. For example, classroom lighting

and thermal comfort are commonly cited by lecturers as determinants of their own morale and the engagement of their students.

The importance of the attribute of the class. Based on the interview, the attribute of the classroom seem to be important to show in order to improve the students' motivation and interest in learning. The attribute of the classroom makes the class look attractive. Therefore, the students are eager to notice them owing to it is related to literature. It contains of the pictures of the literature experts, vocabularies, group project, phrases in English, English quotes, etc. Though it has not been there yet, but the new building will provide classes special for literature department. Thus, it can be implemented well if there are participations between the students and the lecturers.

To create conducive atmosphere the lecturers should be able to organize classroom owing to it requires a good time management skill and it had better have an appealing physical classroom environment. Conducive atmosphere means to enhance the learning process entailing classroom management which means improving it more than just maintaining strict and rigid control over the content of the class which means establishing a comfortable environment by allowing everyone to learn, interact, and participate freely.

The other factors creating good atmosphere. The data from interview showed that there are some factors which can create good atmosphere instead of the points mentioned before. Those are related to physical and psychological factors for the students for instance what makes them always come to study at campus, want to leave the lecture, enhance their motivation in learning, make them difficult to study, be satisfied in learning, and factors causing some periodic health problem. The way the lecturer delivers the lesson really affects the students' attention. When he/she just talks one way without interacting with them, it causes being annoyed.

Likewise, the output of the lesson should be useful for them to implement. Even the physical condition of the class for instance the fade color of the wall, the broken AC, the scratch on the wall bothers the students, but the lecturer plays an important role to create conducive atmosphere in learning.

Thus, it is inferred from the data that sometimes classroom condition or good atmosphere does not always depend on the class condition physically but it is from the other factors such as the lecturer, friends, motivation, and satisfaction. When the lecturer teaches in fun and creative way, it will create more conducive atmosphere psychologically for the students. Hence the classroom management plays an important role in TEFL in creating good atmosphere due to it is a pivotal linchpin and the lecturer jokes can improve the students' mood during learning interaction.

There is a strong connection between a good classroom atmosphere and managing good behavior in teaching. It will create a good learning situation as well. In order to create a good environment it is vital for the lecturers to form a good relationship between themselves and the students for examples learning the students' names as quickly as possible, as well as learn about their life backgrounds, what they like or they hate, their strengths and weaknesses. This should be started as early as possible in a new course, for example by asking the students to write about themselves in a diary the lecturer gives feedback or comments related to their story.

This makes the students feel looked upon as individuals and promotes a good relationship between them. Similarly they discovered that it was necessary for the lecturer working in a mixed ability class to create a good atmosphere where the students feel secure, can voice their opinions and ask questions without feeling anxious. The literature they read also brought up this point as a vital element to focus on when working in mixed-ability classes.

Anticipating the class condition problems faced by the students. Anticipating the class condition problems faced by the students is the most important element to evaluate. From the data obtained, it was revealed that the students feel sick or annoyed owing to the class condition which bothers them in learning. It can be caused by the broken facilities, the wooden floor, the noise, the smoke of cigarettes, etc. Therefore the bureaucracy should notice or anticipate the class condition problems faced by the students by giving strict regulation in every classroom and by maintaining the building and the facilities at campus. Therefore the Head of the campus and the bureaucracy should insist upon a positive maintenance program to keep the building in a good state of repair or maintenance and in clean condition.

In fact, Fajar University has shown good progress in establishing a new building which will be much better than the existing ones. It is expected the facilities and the restrooms are adequate on each floor. Pooling together the points of discussions above, the collaborative communication activities which bridged the students' gaps in their perspectives cover the following ideas namely (1) collaborative communication activities as like role play, information gap, problem solving, ice breakers, ICT mediated communication activities, story-telling, making group project, literacy development, and the other additional indoor and outdoor activities, (2) varied learning interaction preferred by the students, (3) students' profiles which elaborate different personality and personal interest factors causing the gap, and (4) teaching media which make learning more fun in the mixed ability class.

In addition, there are some classroom conditions in students' point of view which will create conducive atmosphere in learning English. The classroom conditions include (1) the physical condition of the class i.e. the temperature control, air quality, light quality, equipment order and quality, size, wall writing surface (whiteboard), and space for computers or laptops in

the classroom which are in good condition, (2) the importance of the attribute of the class for instance the class project and any other things related to literature, (3) the other factors which are physically and psychologically can create good atmosphere namely the lecturer, friends, motivation, and satisfaction, and (4) anticipating the class condition problems faced by the students i.e. preventing conditions which make them sick and by maintaining the facilities and the building especially in the classroom.

Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussion of the findings in the previous chapter, the researcher has come to the following conclusions. If the collaborative communication activities in regard to the students' perspectives are implemented in fun and collaborative way, the gaps among them are reduced. The varied activities can be applied alternately in learning interaction and adjusted with the material taught especially in speaking subject. They are performed individually, in pairs, and in a group as what the informants suggested. Besides different personality and personal interest factors which cause the gap were reduced by doing those activities. The appealing teaching media which make learning more fun in the mixed ability class also have good contribution in boosting the students' motivation in learning English.

Furthermore, there are some classroom conditions in students' point of view which create conducive atmosphere in learning English including the physical condition of the class, the existence of the class attributes, and the other factors which physically and psychologically can create good atmosphere such as the lecturer, friends, motivation, and satisfaction. Anticipating the class condition problems faced by the students should be noticed as well by the bureaucracy.

Hence, if the classroom conditions are good and the atmosphere is conducive, the students will be much better in learning interaction.

Suggestion

Considering the conclusions above, the researcher give suggestions as follows.

1. The lecturers can apply the collaborative communication activities when the gaps occur in the classroom or apply them as alternative approaches in teaching specific materials.
2. The lecturers should provide more interesting media in teaching, modify the learning interaction among the students, and be more interactive with the students.
3. The bureaucracy of the campus should give strict regulation in using the classroom with its facilities by banning the students to smoke in the class, scratching the facilities, and using the electricity as wise as possible. Maintaining the building and its facilities should be noticed as well.
4. The future researchers are suggested to investigate about the gaps occurred in different aspects especially in TEFL learning interaction.

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