LEARNING THROUGH DISCUSSION: A STUDY TO FOSTER STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT IN EFL CLASS

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Abstract- *This research aims to foster students' engagement through small group discussions. The focus is on implementing group discussion strategies on classroom performance and students' achievement. A qualitative design was used along with the observations and interviews, and enriched with a small group discussion teaching framework. The result showed that small group discussions positively contribute to students' involvement in the classroom, enhance critical thinking, and raise motivation. The activities provide opportunities to increase their upbeat view of learning English. Hopefully, the result can be a practical suggestion for lecturers or teachers to maximize the students' active participation in ELF classes.*

Keywords: students' engagement; small group discussion; students' active

INTRODUCTION

Developing student autonomy is an essential part of the foreign language teaching method. The newest teaching regulation transforms learning and actively forces students to participate in learning (Kolhekar et al., 2021). This means activating learning methods toward classroom engagement is crucial (Barrineau et al., 2019). In addition, to have an effective learning environment, good interaction between teacher and student must exist in the classroom (Miller, 2017). There are large tasks or activities to promote students' engagement, such as collaborative learning, pair task, and group work (Wahyudi et al., 2020). Therefore, a teacher should design suitable pedagogical instruction to engage students in language learning to improve proficiency and development.

The teacher's role in second language development is to provide various teaching methods for students to let them experience the target language. This kind of stimulus is important to achieve the foreign language learning objective, especially English. However, the writers found from the pre-observation results that the students still had less engagement in the classroom; they preferred to listen and take notes than speak and showed passive interaction in classroom discussions. They were afraid of making mistakes while conveying their ideas in English. Nevertheless, they were afraid to

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participate actively in learning. It restrained them from getting involved in speaking activities which became a barrier to achieving communicative competence in speaking English. Thus, to address the problem, teachers must use suitable methods or instruction to foster students' active participation and engagement.

Reflecting on students' active participation, engagement, collaborative learning, or group work has become vital (Zhang & Meng, 2016). Past studies have proved that group work, which deals with problem-solving and decision-making, requires student involvement (Adair, 2010; Burke, 2011; Chinedu et al., 2015; 2018; Kolhekar et al., 2021). Group work is a strategy to promote academic accomplishment and interaction (Hammar Chiriac, 2014). Group work has been highlighted as a tool for improving students' participation (Debele & Kelbisa, 2017; Forslund Frykedal & Hammar Chiriac, 2018; Fung & Howe, 2014; Pollock et al., 2011; Wahyudi et al., 2020). It becomes an effective teaching method to shape learning if managed appropriately to promote students' engagement and enhance their cognitive skills. Moreover, implementing group work is essential to help students fully engage in learning.

Recent research has also highlighted discussion as a teaching technique for developing students' engagement (Abdullah et al., 2012a; Ampatuan & Jose, 2016; Indriani, 2016; Robson, 2016). The discussion allows learners to learn from peers (Tesfaye & Berhanu, 2015; Yusuf Alfino et al., 2019). It can increase learners' time to speak while interacting and practicing the language with other students. They can build and creates meaningful conversations in the target language through discussion (Achmad & Yusuf, 2014; Hanum, 2009; Indriani, 2016). The students will become active learners through group work teaching strategy as they engage in real-time activities (Abdullah et al., 2012a; Alias et al., 2021; Jones, 2014; Rahmat et al., 2018). Furthermore, group discussion indeed enhances learning and interaction among students, which further leads to better achievement.

Although the discussion has numerous benefits in learning, students' active involvement still seems to be a critical problem, particularly in EFL contexts. Language teachers encounter challenges motivating them to engage and participate in the classroom (Barlow et al., 2020; Bergmark & Westman, 2018; Mafuraga & Moremi, 2017; Reimers et al., 2020). Moreover, the findings of the above studies on classroom participation can not be applied to every institution. Therefore, to fill this gap a comprehensive study to

explore how small group discussions, with a clear framework, influence students' active participation at different English levels of learners was carried out. To be exact, this study aims to find improvement in the classroom and to foster students' participation by applying small group discussions as the teaching strategy. Furthermore, the researchers expect that the study's results could be beneficial for developing students' engagement in the classroom.

METHODS

Research design

A qualitative design was employed in this research. Qualitative research investigates issues on behaviors or actions and creates a rich view of the phenomena (Kendall A. KingYi-Ju LaiStephen May, n.d.). In this research, the researchers designed activities to identify the problems and prepared a new method to address the issue.

Research site and participants

The research subjects are twenty-two English Literature Study Program students, consisting of fourteen female and eight male students of Sekolah Tinggi Bahasa Asing Pontianak, Indonesia. Their levels of English proficiency vary. Only six out of twenty-two participants are in the upper intermediate level, most are below the middle level, and a few are still beginners.

Data collection and analysis

The observation sheet and interview sheet were used to collect the data. The students' scoring rubric was used to record their progress in achievements. The following is the teaching framework for implementing group discussion:

1st stage: The teacher begins by explaining the student's role in the discussion. They will act as opinion seekers, evaluators, devil advocates, and harmonizers.

2nd stage: Students form a group of four and discuss (each discussion lasts between 10 to 15 minutes and was recorded using the audio recorder). Different topics will be addressed at every meeting (provided by the teacher).

3rd stage: Each student scored their classmates' performance (using a scoring rubric). The teacher also gave constructive feedback to each group.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study determines how group discussion fosters students' active participation in the classroom. The results proved that the number of students participating in five weeks of observation improved. Nevertheless, with the slow improvement, it was revealed that the students' engagement or active participation appeared throughout the learning process. Therefore, the findings indicated that applying small group discussions promoted students' engagement in the classroom. The results will be described in the following.

Developing Students' Engagement

The student's engagement improved dramatically towards the end of the last meeting. The students showed willingness and effort to speak English after five observation meetings. They were able to give and respond to questions. They could express their idea during discussions and be able to give feedback after the discussion. Notably, the confident students were enthusiastic about participating in each opportunity in the classroom. They were eager to participate, voicing ideas, and asking and responding to the teacher's or classmates' questions. However, those improvements could not be seen in the beginning. The student's engagement was still shallow in the first meeting. Most of the students were still passive. They preferred to be listeners than to comment or give feedback. Only a few students participated when the teacher asked them to comment on the group that had a discussion. Most of them just sat in silence or talked in Bahasa Indonesia. In sum, there were still some problems regarding their engagement in the learning process.

The result of observation in the following meetings indicated improvement in student engagement. The students showed behavioral changes in participation due to the modification of activities by the teacher. The teacher encouraged them to speak by providing essential phrases to use in the discussion. The teacher also invited others to participate in giving their feedback after the performance of each group. The teacher also prepared the scoring rubric for group discussion, and the students were willing to comment on and evaluate their peers' performances. In addition, after doing similar activities, most of the students seemed to enjoy their talk. They get used to it and be able to follow the instruction well. As a result, they engaged in the learning process, which

means the students' improvement in the second and third meetings was satisfactory enough. However, the fourth meeting was held to explore their communicative competence and confidence.

The students improved the discussion pace in the fourth and fifth meetings. The students showed a variety of responses. They started to initiate and participate more during the discussion. They also spontaneously asked a question and gave opinions without hesitation. They paid attention more and spent effort in completing the discussion. In sum, they got various chances to explore the target language in the discussion. Therefore, the student's engagement increased significantly compared to the first meeting.

Based on the findings, students' engagement occurs within a conducive learning environment (Abdullah et al., 2012a; Bergmark & Westman, 2018; Osa & Musser, 2017; Taylor & Parsons, 2011). Following the teacher's instruction and contributing to class or group discussions are forms of behavioral engagement (Reeve & Lee, 2014; Saeed & Zyngier, 2012). When the students try to ask and give questions, convey ideas, ask for clarification, learn from their peers, and work collaboratively in a group, it indicates they have involvement in learning (Burke, 2011; Forslund Frykedal & Hammar Chiriac, 2018; Reeve & Lee, 2014). As a result, participating in the discussion facilitates their active learning and further affects academic achievement.

Promoting Students Critical Thinking

Dealing with several topics that required solving problems during the discussion, the student's critical thinking occurred within the process. They were involved in the process where they were allowed to brainstorm and recall answers to the topic/problem given. They identified, analyzed, and looked for solutions for the issues (from the topic given). They learned how to respond to controversial issues, convincing reasons to support their answers, providing evidence, respecting other people's ideas, and providing constructive feedback to each other. Significantly, it helped them practice critical thinking.

The findings enable students to be aware of their higher-order thinking. The activities lead them to strengthen elements of their logical improvement, problem analysis and solution generation, and recognition or appreciation of ideas (Chinedu et al., 2015; Kolhekar et al., 2021; Schulz & FitzPatrick, 2016). They experienced dealing with

authentic problems, encouraging peers in the discussions, and fostering inquiry-oriented experiments (Gossett & Fischer, 2005; Helterbran, 2007; Pollock et al., 2011). Those are good chances to develop critical thinking skills. In sum, the discussion can build students' critical thinking by optimizing students' roles in learning.

Enhancing Students Motivation

Within the five weeks of implementation of group discussion, the student's motivation to speak improved. They showed interest and were ready to face any challenge during the discussion. They did what was required for the learning objective; they showed enthusiasm to complete the task (solve the problem in the discussion). In addition, the teacher gave constructive feedback on the spot and appreciated students' achievements directly. The teacher intended to make students aware that every task or assignment is valuable, noteworthy, and deserving of their efforts. The chosen topics (prepared by the teacher) were also exciting topics to discuss to encourage and raise their motivation.

Moreover, the group discussion framework involves activities designed to promote students' interest and involvement. However, at the beginning of the observation, some students were still reluctant and shy to speak due to low self-motivation. In this case, the teacher offered more time to perform in a small group where they could rehearse with their group members. It had an effect in which they slowly became more confident in conveying their thoughts within the lesson. The teacher's encouragement and compliment also influence their strong motivation to learn. Creating a relaxed and supportive learning environment is essential to facilitate positive learning habits (Abdullah et al., 2012b, 2012a; Ampatuan & Jose, 2016; Debele & Kelbisa, 2017; Miller, 2017).

Furthermore, the results of interview proved that most students were eager and interested in doing the activities due to various speaking chances they got. It significantly boosts their confidence and motivation to learn. They also argued that this kind of learning method was challenging yet convenient for improving their speaking skills. The self-evaluation worksheet and recording of their performance in each meeting were a big help. The students said they could reflect on and evaluate their performance through self-evaluation worksheets and the recording. However, a view students felt a bit pressured during the discussion; they found it hard and challenging to act in the role given. Nevertheless, most students believed participating in the group discussion encouraged self-esteem and boosted their motivation to enhance their communicative competence.

CONCLUSION

This study figured out that the small group discussion framework facilitated classroom exchange and exposure for students to use the target language and create an effective learning atmosphere. Remarkably, all students enjoyed their learning and improved their active learning. They also showed enthusiasm to be more fluent in speaking. small group discussions stimulated students' engagement with more opportunities to show their effort, raising their communicative competence. In conclusion, this study is beneficial for developing students' engagement in the classroom. This study had weaknesses: the number of participants cannot be generalized. Even though the framework works well, combining various assignments could have been permitted. Therefore, it is recommended to look for more exposure to improve students' language proficiency beyond the classroom.

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