

Developing Student's Literacy through English Debate Practice

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Abstract

Literacy should be owned by students since it will help them provide extensive ideas in maintaining communication. Debate practice is a way of enhancing student's literacy development. A study has been done on a case in English speaking class at the English Education Department, Teacher Training and Education Faculty, Muria Kudus University. This study aims at exploring the effort done to develop student's literacy through the use of English Debate Practice in the classroom. By using a qualitative approach, the study finds that the use of English debate practice has stimulated student's activeness in searching important information and enriching knowledge about various topics discussed in the debate. As a result, student's literacy is gradually developed. The study also shows that the debate practice has made the students do some efforts so that they can put forward opinions, questions, clarification and rebuttal. Therefore, the debate practice can stimulate student's practice of speaking. In conclusion, one of the ways to develop student's literacy is by involving them in a given intensive communication in a classroom through debate practice.

Keywords: *literacy, English debate practice, communicative competence, role play*

Background of the Study

English students are demanded not only to master language skills, such as reading, speaking, writing and listening, but also to develop their literacy. Literacy will enable them to participate in a wider society or community in which they are involved as they graduate from their university. Literacy covers an extent of learning which enable students to develop their knowledge and potential as they improve their language skills. Student's literacy is necessary to develop since it is associated with student's communicative competence. Richards (2006) suggests that communicative competence includes several aspects of language knowledge, i.e. (1) knowing how to use language for range of different purposes and functions, (2) knowing how to vary the use of language according to the settings and participants, (3) knowing how to produce and understand different types of texts, (4) knowing how to maintain communication despite having limitation in one's language knowledge. Referring to the above concept, it is known that maintaining communication is a part of communicative competence. Meanwhile, literacy is considered as a way needed to maintain communication. Hence, literacy has a close relationship with the concept of communicative competence. In other words,

developing student's literacy will support the effort of developing student's communicative competence. Kern (2000) states that effective oral communication generally requires 'literate' sensibilities about the particular ways the foreign language can be used in particular settings.

There are many efforts that can be done by English teachers or lecturers to develop student's literacy. One of them is by involving students in intensive and interactive communication through debate practice. Debate practice is believed to be able to stimulate students to learn a lot about knowledge and information besides practicing language skills. Debate practice is a sample of role play activity by which students can have an opportunity to practice communicating in different social contexts and roles. This kind of role play activity can make the world of the classroom broadened to include the outside world. This classroom setting can also provide opportunities of language practice. All types of students including those who are "quiet" will get the chance to express themselves in a more forthright way. By doing the activity of debate practice, students are hoped to have encouragement to increase their knowledge and information about various topics of discussion, so that they can practice how to put forward ideas, how to defend an argument, how to rebut a statement and consequently their literacy as well as speaking skill are also trained and improved as they are involved in intensive communication in the debate practice.

Based on this point of view, I am interested in studying this case in English speaking class at the English Education Department, Teacher Training and Education Faculty, Muria Kudus University.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims at exploring a case of an effort to develop student's literacy through the use of English Debate Practice in a classroom at the English Education Department, Teacher Training and Education Faculty, Muria Kudus University.

Literacy Development, Role Play and Language Education

Since the notion of literacy has been extended beyond the strict traditional limits of reading and writing skills, literacy is then correlated with many fields of study, such as linguistics, psychology, sociology, and cultural studies. It is as argued by Kern (2000) that literacy is not only the ability to produce and interpret texts but also a critical awareness of the relationship between texts, discourse convention, and social and cultural contexts. Even, literacy is also discussed in health perspective as maintained by Needlman (www.drspock.com) that literacy gives people power to live healthier lives. Additionally, a study of literacy is also correlated with the ability to understand information, fact rules, and instruction that allow individuals to function in society (Flower in Kern, 2000). It shows that literacy has very close relationship with the goal of taking language, i.e. communicative competence. Kern (2000) states that literacy involves communication. He also points out that some educators currently argue that oral communication skills should be the primary goal of foreign language education, given the opportunities created by the global market.

Effective oral communication requires 'literate' sensibilities about the particular ways the foreign language can be used in particular settings. Canale in Celce Murcia and Olshtain (2000) proposes that communicative competence can be described as consisting of at least four components: linguistic or grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. In terms of sociolinguistic competence, for example, it is important for students to understand about what particular language choices are appropriate for particular social setting. Students should also know how language is used in spoken or written context to create discourse (Kern, 2000). This has also shown that communicative competence and literacy cannot be separated from each other. Therefore, it can be understood that the activity of language education should involve efforts of developing literacy since students will not be able to maintain communication (as the main goal of language course) if they are not literate towards certain topic of discussions.

Role play has been a chosen technique for improving students' communicative competence. Harmer in Van de Bogart (2006) suggests, "Role-play activities are those where students are asked to imagine that they are in different situations and act accordingly". Acting out a specific situation with role-play is closer to the real world of conversational English (Van de Bogart, 2006). Approaches or models of Role Play have been put forward in teaching conversational English. One of the models of role play is by engaging students in specific situation where students are supposed to have intensive communication serving as people in the forum of House of Representative performing a debate on certain public cases. This is a debate practice which allows students to present arguments or opinions and defending them as well as rebutting other students' arguments or opinions as if they were in a real situation in the forum of the House of Representative. Students will be stimulated to seek information and knowledge about the topic they are debating. Consequently, their literacy will be developed as well as their speaking ability.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach by portraying a case of classroom activities in an English speaking class which uses a debate practice as a technique of developing both student's literacy and English speaking skill. The debate system used in this classroom is Austral-Asian Debate system. Before the students have the debate practice, the lecturer gives theoretical material of debate guidelines as well as adjudication guidelines. This theoretical discussion is done in three meetings and it has allowed students to discuss all the rules of the Austral-Asian Debate System, so that they will really be ready to practice it in the classroom. Then, students are divided into some groups of three. One group consists of first speaker, second speaker and third speaker. Then, the teacher (lecturer) shows the motions of the debate. Two groups will share the same motion of debate. Speakers in each team have different task. First speaker will have to define the case and introducing team-split. Second speaker will support the idea of first speaker from different points of view. Third speaker will have to sum up the whole ideas of first and second speaker. Besides substantive speech which lasts 7 minutes, there must also be reply speech which lasts 5 minutes. Reply speaker must come from first or second

speaker. Groups which share the same topic will post different standing point as affirmative or negative team.

In every classroom meeting (every week) there are two groups which have the debate session. They have to perform the debate activities as the affirmative team or the negative one. When the debate session is performed by the assigned groups of affirmative and negative teams, other students should participate to be adjudicators (three persons of them) and the audience. The students assigned to be the adjudicators must give comments and assessment on the performance of the debaters. With regard to the adjudicating activities, the lecturer encourages students to take the opportunity to be the adjudicators voluntarily. There will be additional score for students who are eager to be the adjudicators. This is done in order to motivate students not only to participate in the debate activity as the debaters but also to take part in the activity in any positions.

Findings

The study finds that the use of English debate practice has stimulated students' activeness in searching important information and enriching knowledge about various topics discussed in the debate. As a result, students' literacy is gradually developed, at least on the topic area of the debate. The study also shows that the debate practice has made the students do some effort so that they can put forward opinions, questions, clarification and rebuttal. Therefore, the debate practice can stimulate students' practice of speaking. This activity is proven to be effective to encourage students improving their literacy. The literacy development occurs when the students make use of the time for preparing the debate session. They usually access internet, read books, newspapers, or magazines for the supporting data and information. During the preparation time, they will be stimulated to read a lot and practice a lot for the sake of winning the debate session. In debate competition, the adjudication is not only based on the way the speech is delivered but also based on the strength of the proposed argument as well as the supporting data given by the debaters. This adjudication system has forced students to read and access as much information and data as possible from any sources of knowledge and information. As a consequence, students' literacy is gradually developed. Information and supporting data found and accessed by the students will help them maintain the communication when they deliver speech in the debate session. In turn, their ability to communicate is also developed as they increase their literacy.

Discussion

English debate practice has found to be effective to stimulate students' activeness in improving their knowledge and searching information. This activity will gradually develop students' literacy since it provides encouragement for students to compete and win their ideas and arguments. Consequently, they will try to do their best in getting as much information and knowledge as possible to be able to defend their argument. Debate practice as a sample of role play model gives students chance and encouragement to read a lot and study intensively to search supporting data and information. This activity allows the exposure of some literacy

development activities, such as *interpreting, collaborating, culture study, problem solving, reflecting, and language use* (Kern, 200). Teachers or lecturers will be able to maximize the activeness of the students in having autonomous learning which has become the goal setting of the implementation of *Competency Based Curriculum* (KBK-Kurikulum Berbasis Kompetensi). Poorman (2002) states, "true learning cannot take place when students are passive observers of the teaching process". Therefore, to make the learning activities really occur in the classroom, teachers/lecturers should make the students involved in certain classroom situation that makes them encouraged to be active in giving participation in the classroom. Role play is an alternative approach to stimulate students' activeness or participation. This is an example of the application of Student Centered Learning Model as directed in the concept of the *Competency Based Curriculum* (KBK). In fact, this model of curriculum has now been promoted in the English Education Department of Muria Kudus University.

Debate practice as a model of role play is an alternative way of encouraging students' autonomy in learning. This will be in line with the implementation of Student Centered Learning Model which has been the core issue in the performance of *Competency Based Curriculum* (KBK). Therefore, English Education Departments which are now implementing KBK will find 'debate practice' an alternative to foster students' autonomous learning which is in accordance with the concept of *Student Centered Learning*. Soft skills can also be improved by this activity since students will practice acting to be somebody else in solving public problems either as protagonist or antagonist towards the government's policy. As a result, students will be trained to control and manage their emotion. This role play activity may also be able to teach empathy and understanding of different perspectives because the students are involved in a debate of argument in an academic atmosphere. In this case, students are challenged to have dynamic controversy of argument but in the corridor of problem solving and academic perspective.

Conclusion

English students are demanded not only to have good language skills but also to develop their literacy. Literacy will enable them to interact with people in a real social life since literacy can help them communicate well. One of the ways to develop students' literacy is by involving them in a given intensive communication in a classroom through debate practice. Finally, based on the above discussion, there several concluding points as follows: *First*, Literacy development cannot be separated from the effort of improving students' communicative competence; *Second*, Debate Practice is an alternative of a role play model to develop students' literacy and communicative competence; *Third*, Debate Practice is an alternative of role play model which can be used to promote the implementation of Student Centered Learning Approach as directed in the concept of *Competency Based Curriculum*.

Recommendation

English teachers or lecturers should find creative activities in a classroom to develop students' literacy as well as language skills. These two things cannot be separated from each other since in communication students need ideas or views to share with. Debate Practice is an example of the alternative classroom activity which can be used to develop students' literacy. However, there are still many other alternative and creative classroom activities which are needed to be searched and designed in order to encourage students to develop their literacy.

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