Action Research in Action: Enhancing Students to Reach Their Speaking Goal with Confidence in a Large Class with Limited Time by Action Research Procedures and Awareness-Raising

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Abstract. This research reports the effectiveness of students' and a teacher's reflection on their learning and teaching happened in a large class with limited time. The study showed that the processes of action research in action (setting, focus, investigation, response, reflection and task) identified three problems happened in action. *Students came to the class late, they did not pay much attention in speaking lesson review* and *they did not try to response teacher's questions.* Those problems may be students' obstacles to speak. Also the study investigated how action researcher procedures (plan, act, observe, reflect, revise and report) and awareness-raising could solve the problems and enhance students to reach their speaking goal with confidence in a large class with limited time at their own pace. Action research procedures were used to study the processes and participants' outcomes. The awareness-raising discussion prompts were used to increase students' reflection on their language learning achievement, especially speaking English. The data obtained from students' and a teacher's action research procedures indicated that enhancing students to reach their goal the students themselves had to change their learning behaviors and also I as a teacher and researcher had to used variety of teaching techniques and various theories in all steps of teaching, pre-while and post teaching. Tuckman's model, stages of forming, storming, norming and performing, with one plus technique encouraged students to come to the class on time. Teacher's roles: helper, encourager, facilitator and motivator were one of the factors to encourage students' learning and to have students slightly change from negative to positive attitudes towards language learning. Planning step (goal-setting) with learner contract also helped them to have more systems and more time to practice speaking English outside of classroom. Using question and answer techniques focusing on individual response enhanced them to participate with confidence in speaking in a large class and limited time. Finally, awareness-raising helped students to think carefully about how to improve their language learning at their own pace. The study was carried out with forty first-year engineering students of the college of Industrial Technology, King Mongkut's University of Technology North Bangkok taking 810301: English I course. They were asked to participate in the activities while they were attending their regular class. The data were collected from both students and a teacher's reflection on the outcomes of action researcher procedures and the processes of action research in action. The research showed that the processes of action research in action, action research procedures, Tuckman's model, teacher's roles, goal-setting, question & answer technique and awareness-raising could enhance students to reach their English speaking goal at their own pace.

Keywords: Action Research Procedures, Awareness-Raising Discussion Prompts, Question & Answer Technique.

1. Introduction

Because of the 10-member Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) seeking cooperation to create an ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) by 2020, it would have a combined population of over 575 million and total trade exceeding about US$ 1,400 billion (© 2009 Thailand Convention & Exhibition Bureau). Therefore, the relationship development of all aspects of ASEAN community such as economy, science and technology, politic, socio-culture or education should be bonded together in partnership as a strong community of caring and sharing. Thailand is one of the members we have to prepare our country to

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join with them. Language learning, especially speaking is one of the main factors to combine us together. English language is going to be a tool of communication to other countries. Nowadays, no matter how fast the country progresses in science and technology, how to have students and teachers be aware of using and understanding action research procedures in their language learning and teaching are still significant for our education development. Although, my engineering students had serious problems about speaking English, having negative attitudes and bad experience in language learning, they were most interested in improving speaking skills according to data obtained from a minor in investigating in the first day of the first semester (2011). Preliminary data of students' learning requirements in English of 4 year bachelor program (n=161) shown as follow: speaking 50.93%, listening 34.16%, reading 9.93 and writing 4.96. In the second semester of 2011, by informal talking randomly and surveying 120 engineering students of 4-year bachelor program, the data were still shown that speaking skill was the most wanted to develop. As results, to enhance students to reach their speaking goal at their own pace, I decided to pay more attention in language learning, especially speaking.

2. Literature Review and Presentation

2.1. Essential theories behind the research

There are three main theories for collecting information for the research. They are action research in action, action research procedures and awareness-raising. Action research in action is about classroom-oriented research conducted by classroom teacher (Renandya and Richards, 2003: i) and is a systematic process of teacher inquiry (Hadley, 2003: iii). Action research is the process of systematic collection and analysis of data in order to make changes and improvement or solve problems (Coles & Quirke, 2001, p. 14). Warrican (2006, p. 2) saw the heart of action research as the promotion of collaboration between a research-innovator and his or her clients. Action research procedures were used to investigate the responses of students and teachers, and language learning outcomes. Soonthornroj (2006, p. 69) used action research as a tool to enhance six primary school teachers in doing classroom-based research to analyse and solve problems in their own situations. In this research, both students and I used action research procedures to reflect our participatory outcomes. The aim of this research was to identify the processes of action research in action and action research procedures helped me to find ways to encourage students' speaking. I used the processes of action research in action as a tool to be "early reflection" for finding interesting problems, used awareness-raising for asking myself *Why I have to do that?* to make me clear purposes. Awareness-raising questions helped students and I to be aware the importance of learning and teaching outcomes. I also used action research procedures to help students and me to solve problems. The steps of doing research are summarized below .
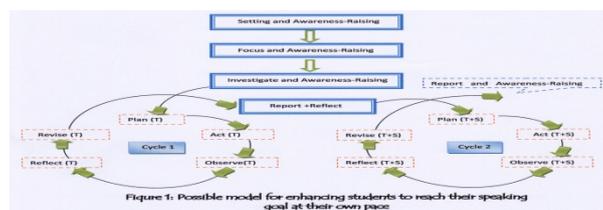

Figure 1: Possible model for enhancing students to reach their speaking goal at their own pace

2.1.1 Setting

Before teaching the first day of the second semester 2/2011, the main aim of setting step was to collect interesting information that happened in the real time and awareness-raising questions were used to encourage students to have more critical thinking towards the situations. In this step, I used awareness-raising question to ask myself. *Why do I have to set my goal teaching?* According to various data obtained from self-reflection, surveying, informal talking and discussing with technical lecturers, colleagues and students, I realized that learning ability to communicate to others should be set in the early steps of learning and teaching. Normally, in this course I usually used mother language to teach students because it was focused on reading. I started to set my goal of communicative teaching to promote students' speaking in the early period, 10-15 minutes for speaking warm-up activities. My teaching goal was *"Enhancing students to reach their speaking goal at their own pace"* was set on this step.

2.1.2 Focus

The aim of this step was to close analysis of interesting information and awareness-raising was used to ask my self *why do I have to focus on speaking*? The answer was speaking was the most students wanted to improve. The question *How to enhance students' confidence in speaking at their own pace?* was closely analyzed. According to the following conditions: learning in a large class (40 students) with limited time in speaking and there were a lot of contents following to the schedule, I realized that 10 to 15 minutes for participating in speaking reviewing activities every early period before teaching next contents should be provided. It meant that students should have to practice speaking outside the class. I used awareness-raising question to ask myself. *How to encourage students to prepare themselves before the class*?

2.1.3 Investigation: The aim of this step was to find out how to solve problems.

In this research, I wanted to investigate how action research procedures could enhance students' confidence in speaking at their own pace. The procedures are as follows:

- *Cycle 1:Plan:* Teacher's Goal-setting: Enhancing students to reach their speaking goal at their own pace by providing 10-15 minutes warm-up activities. I planned to ask students to set their learning goal, focusing on speaking. In the first day of the semester, I planned to provide 10-15 minutes warm-up activities (speaking reviewing activities) by using the following questions: *What did you learn last semester? What do you think about your speaking English now? Would you like to say anything else?* I used awareness-raising question to ask myself: *Why do I have to use 10-15 minutes speaking activities?* The answer was to encourage students to speak as much as they could.

Act and observe: teaching and describing what happened

In the first day of the semester 2/2011, I came to the class before time because I was curious to meet my new students and I noticed that no one was in the class until 10 minutes late. Few students gradually came to the class and they told me that the others were on their ways. I waited until 9.30 and I started to introduce myself, asked their language learning goal, and the questions provided. The atmosphere at that time war rather bored and few students responded my questions. Therefore I realized that there were three negative events happened. First, few students came to the class on time. Secondly, they did not pay attention in warm-up speaking activities and finally their responses to my questions were rather quiet and boring. However, by formal talking, most of them wanted to improve their speaking but they did not know how to reach their goal.

Reflect: Thought and analyzed of what happened in the class?

These three negative events might demotivate students to practise speaking, especially in the large class with limited time. I thought that I had to do something if I wanted to reach my teaching goal. In immediately reflecting in my mind, I summarized as follows. As these assuming, I hope that during ten to fifteen minutes with group working activities in the early period would help students to review previous contents as much as possible. **Situation 1:** In my situation most students came to the class ten to thirty minutes late. This meant that students lacked a chance to join speaking activities. As a result, it might affect their speaking abilities. *How did I encourage them to go to the class on time?* This question came up with in my mind immediately. **Situation 2:** Before teaching new contents, I asked students about previous lessons. They spoke nothing. I realized that if I do nothing, the students would lack opportunity to speak. To enhance students to reach their speaking goal, I thought of the question *How to have students be aware of advantages of speaking lesson review in the early period every week.* **Situation 3**: During teaching speaking with limited time, I observed that few students being asked spoke a little bit whereas the others ignored and talked to others. So I thought of the question: *How did I increase students' responses as much as possible?*

Revise: I would used action research procedures for cycle 2 to solve the problem again but I emphasized on discussing and planning together with students to get the real information at that time.

Report: I started to write ways to solve problems coming up with in my mind on my journal. **Tasks were changed better for cycle II:**

The purpose of the research was to enhance students to reach their speaking goal with confidence in a large class with limited time. After passing 45 minutes, I felt curious to teach speaking warm-up activities again. I thought I had time to do that because in the first week of the semester, the content to teach was

introducing the course syllabus. If finished, it would end of the class for that day. Therefore I decided to start teaching 10-15 minutes warm-up activities again but change something better.

- ***Cycle 2 :Plan:*** Goal-setting: Enhancing students to reach their speaking goal at their own pace. This step was very significant for the teacher to explain how important to be aware of planning if we wanted to reach our goal. However, to reach this goal students and I had to work together to get rid of three obstacles we met. Therefore the questions I planed to ask students to help together to answer the questions shown as follows: Situation 1: *How to encourage students to study on time?*

Situation 2: *How to encourage students to pay attention to speaking warm-up activities?* Situation 3: *How to increase students' responses towards speaking activities?*

Act and Observe: In situation 1, I tried very hard to encourage students to discuss together

about how to solve the problems in terms of using soft voice, smiling while waiting students' responses, admiring when they spoke even though a little bit. At first most of them tried to explain and excused why they had to be late. Someone knew the importance and usefulness of coming to the class on time, however they still confirmed about their importance why they had to be late. As a results of that I tried to use one plus technique to motivate students to come to the class on time. There were 10 marks for class attendance. If they were absent or late each time, their marks would be reduced. One score was reduced for being absent and a half score for being late in each time. Therefore my conditions were offered to the students. If students came to study on time, they would get two pulses (++). It meant that if they came to the class on time every week, their pluses would be increased. The symbols of marking are: **(√)** for present, (X) for absent and (L) for late. If they got two pluses, (L) would disappear. If they got four pluses, (X) would disappear. It meant that they could get 10 full scores even though they were sometimes absent or late. While discussing about the conditions, I noticed that some of them felt excited and happy so the atmosphere at that time was rather fun and amusing. Most of them promised to study on time. In situation 2, I asked them to discuss together about how to help them to reach their speaking goal. They helped together to discuss and told many ways to improve their speaking. At that time I realized that they knew a lot of theories, but they did nothing. Suddenly, one of them speak loudly, ***force me and I will do. If you don't, I never do.*** At that time I realized that giving few speaking assignments with learner-contract every week would help them to improve their speaking and I observed that they felt happy to do the assignments, however, they asked me to accept their conditions. The assignments had to be easy and not many. In situation 3, I asked students to think about how to increase their responses towards my questions. One of them said, *"I don't understand what you said and if I understand the questions, I don't know how to speak because of having no any vocabulary in my mind."* Due to his reasons, I changed the questions immediately by using the following questions: *What is your name? What is your major? Where are you studying now? Where are you from? What do you do in your free time?* Most students could answer the questions. The atmosphere gradually changed into positive. While asking, I noticed that just few students had a chance to answer the question so I thought of question & answer technique adapted from **learn real conversation** to ask students. The ways to use this technique were as follows: A teacher walked around and randomly asked one of the students to answer about his/her **personal and educational questions.** While doing so, the rest students had to respond the questions immediately without waiting the teacher asking them. For the question *what do you do in your free time*, I observed that weak students spoke a little but they spoke with confidence whereas high potential students spoke more. Nevertheless, most students had more confidence in speaking and were brave to ask me back *"and how about you?"* I was very proud and very excited towards students' responses.

Reflect: Situation 1: Most students came to the class late. I used forming (goal-setting), storming (discussing to reach the goal), norming (agreeing to set the rules to perform) and performing (following the rules) adapted from Tuckman's model (as cited in Smith 2005, p.3), one plus technique adapted from Songsiri (2007:241) and teacher's roles (encourager, helper, facilitator) to solve the problem. Situation 2: Students did not pay attention to speaking warm-up activities. I used awareness-raising questions, teacher's roles and goal-setting with learner contract to solve this problem. In this project, I used self-introduction: personal, educational and general background to study the processes of students' speaking. In the following three topics, they were ordered from students most interested and easiest in speaking receiving data from observing students' responses and informal interview. Situation 3: No students' responses towards speaking

activities. I used Question & answer technique adapted from Learn real English conversation to increase students' responses. Even though students' speaking ability did not increase much, they showed their confidence increased at their own pace. I realized that if students and I could reach goals and could reflect our learning and teaching achievement every time, we would have more confidence in learning and teaching as well.

Revise: On this step, there are three main topics to revise. In 10-15 minutes speaking warm-up activities, during question & answer technique activities the questions should be adjusted form the following lessons. In consistency, 10-15 minutes warm-up speaking activities should be provided every week. In disciplinary, both students and a teacher should use action research procedures with awareness-raising to help them to solve their problems.

Report: I began to brave to tell others about my teaching, to accept all comments and to be willing to adjust any change for better.

2.2. Important Information

This topic presents the discussion, implications and suggestions of the findings from the study. It means that action research procedures with action research in action systems with awareness-raising prompts could help students reach their speaking goals at their own pace.   We can use this model to apply to the other problems and develop to the further steps. Whatever problems we meet we could use *plan* to set our goal setting, *act* to start the process, *observe* to look at what happened in the action, *reflect* to think back what things should change better, *revise* to plan again to change something better and finally *report* to tell the others to see our achievements. The more I do action research, the more I am never bored of trying to find new ways of coping with any problems because I know the way to handle them. This could promote both students and a teacher to be autonomous learners and their professional development occurs naturally as well. In conclusion, the researcher sincerely hopes that this small piece of research can somehow be useful for other teachers and students who wish to teach or learn to speak English in similar situation.

3. Acknowledgements

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