

Improving a Course Design through Classroom Action Research

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Abstract: Through two cycles of actions course designed for preparing teachers of English for primary education has been revised. The objectives are to improve the presentation of the course and to meet the students' need and satisfaction. The result shows that according to the students the course has become more interesting and they admit that they have learned a lot from the course activities. By the end of the semester the course design has been reconstructed based on the result of the actions. Group-discussions, students involvement in material and media selection, adaptation and development are the main characteristics of the revised EYL course.

Keywords: course design, English for Young Learners (EYL), classroom action research.

In this article I attempt to share some experience in developing and improving a course entitled "English for Young Learners". This four-credit course has been offered as an elective course programmed for English education students who are interested in the teaching of English to young learners, especially to primary school children.

The recent explosion in teaching English to primary school students has kept teachers, trainers and textbook writers busy preparing instructional material and suitable classroom activities for the students. Unfortunately most primary school teachers who are assigned to teach English have not been trained to cope with this special English instruction before. Using their limited English and without having any background knowledge of

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teaching foreign language methodology, they have to teach English to the young learners in the primary schools.

English is one of local content subjects that may be taught to primary school children following the Decree of Ministry of Education No. 0487/4/1992. It is suggested to be started with the 4th grade students. This might be a part of the government effort to gear the national education to recent advances and modern developments in science and technology. In such a global world, the role of English as a medium of international affairs is undeniably vital (Suyanto & Sulisty, 1998).

Some of the requirements for introducing English instruction to primary schools are the availability of teachers, instructional materials and, obviously, the need of the local community. Although many good, private primary schools had started teaching English long before the public schools did, previous studies (Dardiri, 1994; Rachmajanti, 1999; Suyanto, 1997) revealed that the teaching of English at these schools was unsatisfactory. The teachers' performance and creativity in implementing the teaching learning activities were low. In addition, most of teachers who are assigned to teach English are classroom teachers. They have to teach other subjects such as mathematics, Bahasa Indonesia, natural sciences, and social study besides English. They have little or no experience of teaching English as a foreign language to children, therefore the result of the English program at primary schools is not very promising.

The English Department of the State University of Malang has attempted to solve one of the problems by programming a course entitled "English for Young Learners". It is an elective four-credit course offered to English education students who are interested in prepared to be teachers of English in the primary school. The course was firstly offered in the 1995 school year attended by 12 students. Then, in the following years there were more students attending the course: 18 students in 1996, 22 students in 1997, 31 students in 1998, 51 students in 1999, and 26 in the school year of 2001.

As a new course, this program has been continually revised and developed by considering the English education students' evaluation and other input concerning the need of primary school children. As English becomes more and more accepted as a local subject, English teaching for young learners is increasingly included in the primary school programme,

where it is taught by teachers who may not be trained as teachers of EYL. The problem is: how can EYL course be improved so that the students are sufficiently equipped with some practical skills of teaching techniques for young learners. In this case, I believe that the use of classroom action research as a strategy for improving teaching by lecturers, especially teacher trainers, is not an impossible effort.

One of the objectives of this article is to provide some information obtained from factual data and experience in reconstructing a course for students of the English education programme and teachers who have not had any special training in teaching English to children. Also, to show the importance of students' role and evaluation for the systematic planning of the actions can be the evidence that classroom actions research is sufficiently effective for improving or reconstructing a course design.

METHOD

Classroom Action Research (CAR) design was chosen for this study because one of the CAR objectives is to improve the current class condition or to increase the quality of any educational matters. This is two-cycle classroom action research using a model developed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988). The subjects of this research were the 1998/1999 and the 1999/2000 students majoring on English education at the English Department of the Institute of Teacher Training and Education at Malang (now is the State University of Malang). These students have attended the English course for the last six semesters and they took the EYL Course as an elective course because of their interest in teaching English to children.

The students attending this course had two-100-minute sessions every week. Information with a hand-out course-outline was given and intensively discussed to clarify the objectives, instructional activities, and materials of the course.

The instruments used to collect the data are the lecturer's journal and notes, questionnaires, and observation forms. All the students' activities and responses were observed and kept in the lecturer's notes, while questionnaires were used to collect information from the students concerning their perception and opinion on the course materials and activities. This Classroom Action Research (CAR) was conducted in two cycles, each of which was done through four stages: planning the actions, implementing

them, doing class observation and evaluation, and then having reflection of the actions.

During the observation and evaluation stage the data were obtained from the students' participation, their activities, attitudes and tasks. Data collection was simultaneously done during the sessions of the regular meetings in which the lecturer did the implementation of the actions i.e. conducting group discussions and presentations (Cycle I); involving students in particular materials and media selection, adaptation and development (Cycle II) to be used for their peer and micro-teaching.

First Cycle: Class and Group Discussions

I planned to organize group discussions as a key focus for my action research because of the input of the previous EYL programmes.

Implementation

It took 6 weeks (12 meetings) to complete the first cycle. The students were asked to choose peers for a permanent group of 4-5 members. They themselves determined which topics in the course syllabus to be discussed with the members of the group. Each group was responsible for class presentation preceding the "question-answer" activities with members of other groups.

Before the group discussion, I always started the activity using "brainstorming" strategy to generate a large number of ideas quickly. The important thing is to keep the ideas flowing from the students as fast as possible. I just wrote everything down on the board and gave comments on anyone's ideas. When key words relevant to the session's topic, the group discussions were started.

Observation and Evaluation

All students' activities through group discussions and presentations were written in lecturer journal. Students' responses were kept as factual data which had to be analyzed to evaluate the teaching. Several sessions later I found that the students had more questions, comments, and luckily they did read the recommended references more. After having completed the twelfth session I realized that another cycle was needed to get better improvement.

Second Cycle: A combination of teaching techniques

The plan for the next cycle of research emerged from the result of the first cycle. The action was planned in the form of a combination of some teaching techniques. Besides group discussions and class presentations, the second cycle was focusing on the involvement of the students in selecting, adapting, and developing inexpensive media especially inexpensive visuals. These activities took about 9 week or 8 meetings to implement the activities. Individually, the members of the groups were also assigned to do some peer or micro-teaching using the material and media they had developed. I also decided to focus the class sessions around a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the students' peer and micro-teaching.

Reflection

By the end of the second cycle, an interesting perception emerged. Students' observation of their peer's micro-teaching made them aware that teaching English to children was not easy but it was very interesting.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

From the collected data, the result of the first cycle showed that the permanent grouping was appropriate to strengthen the students understanding of the course materials. These students were much more active comparing to the previous generations taking the same course. It should be noted that this course has been developed for about five years and has been gradually revised based on the students' evaluation.

As I reviewed the students' work and replies, I kept a record of their progress and then asked them to clarify their responses, especially their perception on the group activities. Their presentation and assignments were much better and more qualified than those done by the previous students. It seemed that there was a positive competition among the groups. They tried to do their best to prepare the material for the presentation. They also showed more confidence to argue their position using appropriate sources and references they got from the library.

Some students' input had implications for my teaching performance. For example, they identified there were some conflicts between the lecture materials and the journal articles they got. The students actively obtained

information about EYL from relevant sources provided by the main and the English Department libraries. As a course designer, I have also provided them with some textbooks written by Heinich et al (1982), Sarah (1993), Wright (1993; 1995), and Halliwell (1992). In fact, they often suggested that I give more factual examples under Indonesian situations and I did. They want more practical activities and demonstrations to improve their learning-teaching skills. In this stage, I immediately rechecked the materials and discussed in more details with all students. The following action was to continue doing the activities in groups and in pairs but focusing on material and media selection, adaptation and development.

In this second cycle of the study, most teaching and learning activities were still done in groups and in pairs but they were also prepared to do peer and micro-teaching. Again, the students were asked to decide the kinds of media themselves based on the materials of the fourth, fifth or sixth grade students of primary schools. On the average, students made good choice of visuals, i.e. finger, glove and stick puppets, flash cards, miniature of a house, situational pictures, realia, and big books.

Strict observation and consultation were done while the students were completing their projects on inexpensive media appropriate for primary school children. Active participation and regular attendance were also considered before their results were confidently interpreted. Feedback to the students' work was given at the end of class or group presentation. Most students (95%) have completed their projects by the end of the course before doing some peer and micro-teaching using their developed media.

Clearly, the result of this study has supported the effort of improving the course. According to the majority of the students (94.6%) the course content is relevant to the need of primary school teachers who are assigned to teach English. The permanent grouping is considered to be very influential for their motivation (89.9%). Furthermore, the intensity or high frequency of media use is admitted to be very effective in increasing their skills. Most students (96.3%) feel they are successful and become more skillful, only 3.7% of them are uncertain of their ability.

With practice through peer and micro-teaching, my students have also demonstrated their increased ability to vary learning strategies and their problem solving skills. As a matter of fact I become more confident that I have grown to be a more effective trainer. Moreover the reconstructed

course has become an appropriate program for those who are interested in and care for the teaching of English to young learners.

The development of the course design is a continuous process that partly follows the concept of Tyler's (1977) and Breen's (1984) process syllabus for the language classroom. Through classroom action research I have modified these two designs by using results of my own experience and study. An activity-based approach (Vale & Feunteun, 1995) was chosen because it seems to be of far more value to encourage students to acquire knowledge and skills through activities for this EYL course. In brief, the design of the course can be divided into 5 phases: (1) gathering information, ideas, theories and suggestions about EYL; (2) stating the course description and objectives; (3) deciding and sequencing the course materials or topics; (4) evaluating and revising the course design by conducting some actions through CAR; (5) reconstructing the course design using the results of the action research.

In designing a course, a teacher trainer needs to consider his/her students' learning strategies because individual students may have different learning strategy. Thus, it is a need for teacher candidates to have practical knowledge of various learning strategies for their future students (Huda, 1999). It is true that primary school students all over Indonesia vary from region to region and social, geographical, and cultural factors may affect the teaching and learning of English. Hopefully, my experiences doing the action research to improve a course might be beneficial for other lecturers, especially for those who are interested in developing their course design. The following is the final course outline designed for students at the English Department of State University of Malang, Indonesia.

Course Outline

Course Title/Code : English for Young Learners/EGL451
 Credits/Hours : 4/4
 Prerequisite : TEFL and Curriculum Development Courses

Course Description: The course is designed to give students theoretical and practical knowledge of teaching English to young learners. The instructional materials include EYL methodology, instructional materials, visual media, teaching language skills for children, and teaching preparation for peer/micro-teaching using songs, games, and stories.

Course Objective: After completing the course, the students are expected to have practical skills of teaching English to young learners especially primary school children and to enable them to select, adapt, and develop appropriate teaching techniques, material and media for elementary school students.

Course Activities: Lecturing, class/group discussions, demonstration/presentation, classroom visits, peer/micro-teaching, and completing final term projects.

Evaluation:

Participation and attendance	: 10%
Assignment (5)	: 25%
Mid test	: 15%
Presentation (peer and micro-teaching)	: 20%
Final projects	: 30%

Tabel 1. Meeting Schedule

Meetings	Topics	Activities
1	Course Orientation and Introduction	Class discussion
2-3	I. Theoretical Background: 1.1 Teaching English to young learners 1.2 Young learners' characteristics 1.3 Instructional objectives of EYL	- Lecturing - Class discussions
4-5	II. EYL in Indonesia 2.1 Language policy and local content subject 2.2 Fact and research findings	Assignments & group discussions
6-7	III. Instructional Material → (Assignment 1) 3.1 Textbook analysis 3.2 Material development based on local subject syllabus	Group discussion & presentations
8-10	IV. Instructional Media → (Assignment 2) 4.1 Kinds of media (visuals, audio) 4.2 Media selection, development and operation	- Group projects - In-pairs assignments

Meetings	Topics	Activities
11-13	V. Communicative Activities → (Assignment 3) 5.1 Games and songs 5.2 Telling/reading stories	Demonstration, presentation
14-17	VI. Teaching Techniques (Integrated Language Skills): Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing	Group work and presentation
18-19	VII. Teaching Language Components → (Assignment 4), 7.1 Making grammar meaningful 7.2 Selected vocabulary 7.3 Pronunciation drills	- Lecturing - Group discussion - Presentation
20	VIII. Teachers of EYL 8.1 Abilities, skills, attitude 8.2 Classroom management,	Discussion & presentation
21-31	IX. Lesson Plans, Peer and Micro-teaching → (Assignment 5)	Demonstration (individual)
32	X. Summary and Evaluation,	

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Based on the above reports, I can draw the following conclusions and recommendations.

- It is clearly noticed that students' responses and evaluation are very beneficial for a lecturer to improve his/her teaching by reconstructing his/her course design which functions as a guide for the teaching and learning process.
- Some teaching strategies, such as working in groups or in pairs, giving students chances to get involved in selecting, adapting, and developing materials and media could be very effective ways to revise an instructional course design.
- Conducting appropriate actions to improve our teaching or to increase the teaching quality can be based on the results of some evaluation and discussions which are systematically done following an appropriate model of classroom research. Therefore, knowledge of action research methodology is needed by classroom teachers, lecturers and teacher

trainers so that they can benefit from it. Input and results of classroom action research can be used to reconstruct a course design and improve implementation.

- Based on the above conclusion, it is suggested that input and evaluation from students be made during as well as by the end of a course to get some self-reflection of our teaching.
- It is interesting to note that creating effective learning atmosphere, involving our students to select and develop some material and media might be helpful to improve the course. Setting class discussion and creating an appropriate atmosphere will influence the ability of a student-teacher to become a talented empowering educator.

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