THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THEME-BASED TEACHING TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILL (A Classroom Action Research at One of Elementary Schools in Bandung)

Fitria Lathufirdaush*
lathufirdaush@gmail.com
*Graduated in December 2013 from English Education Study Program of Indonesia University of Education

Abstract: This article is based on the study conducted in July and August 2013 to identify the improvement of young learners' speaking skill based on the implementation of Theme-Based Teaching. The study was conducted by using classroom action research design which involved 32 second graders of an Elementary School in Bandung. Furthermore, the data were gathered through speaking assessments and interview. The findings revealed that there was improvement in the students' speaking skill which covered some aspects, including vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. This article concludes by reviewing the result of the research and some activities that can be used in improving students' speaking skill.

Keywords: *young learners, Elementary School, speaking skill, Theme-Based Teaching*

Introduction

In the case of teaching English as foreign language (EFL) to young learners, speaking is claimed as the most important skill to master for the reason that a new language is largely introduced orally, understood orally and aurally, practised and automatised orally (Cameron, 2001 and Nazara, 2011).

However, foreign language learners lack of exposure to use English in communication or interaction because there will be very little experience of the language outside the classroom (Cameron, 2001 and Damayanti, 2010). Therefore, EFL teachers should be able to create the exposures of using English in the classroom through interesting activities in order to involve students within something rather than only keep silent and listen to teacher's explanation (Harmer, 1991).

Literature Review

Today, with the implementation of Curriculum 2013 in any levels of education in Indonesia, Theme-Based Teaching is assumed as the appropriate approach to implement in teaching English to young learners. This approach has the same idea with Curriculum 2013 about integrating the teaching and learning activities under one theme with the intention of enabling students to acquire in-depth study of the

content ("What are thematic", 2012). Additionally, based on Cameron's point of view (2001), Theme-Based Teaching approach suits the way young learners naturally learn. It provides lots of linked activities that allow students who commonly have high enthusiasm to participate actively in the teaching and learning process. Hence, by using this approach, teachers can invent various linked activities which offer lots of opportunities for students to speak up in the classroom as their primary source of language learning (ibid).

As a final point, this article represents the research freshly conducted to identify the improvement of young learners' speaking skill based on the implementation of Theme-Based Teaching in an elementary school in Bandung.

According to Scott and Ytrberg (1990), there are some considerations of implementing Theme-Based Teaching to teach speaking to young learners, including: (1) when teacher is concentrating on particular theme, the content of the lesson automatically becomes more important than the language itself; (2) working on themes can help the learning process; (3) Theme-Based Teaching allows teacher to go into a subject in depth and brings out reactions and feelings in the young learners which are not always covered in the textbook; (4) working on themes allows teacher more easily to give a personal or local touch to materials; (5) Theme-Based Teaching allows teacher to rearrange the material to suit what is happening generally at the time of teaching; (6) the amount of time that is spent on a theme can be as long or short as teacher like; and (7) the work in the classroom naturally includes all the language skills as well as guided and free activities.

Methodology

Classroom Action Research (CAR) was employed as the design of this research. It was deemed suitable since it allowed the researcher to examine practically the improvement of students' speaking skill as a result of her own educational practice in implementing Theme-Based Teaching in the second grade of Elementary School (Ferrance, 2000; and McNiff & Whitehead, 2002). A two-repeated cycle was conducted in this research which consisted of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. A number of 32 second graders of Elementary School in Bandung were chosen as the respondents of this research.

With the intention of gathering objective data, this research applied triangulation to combine more than one instrument in collecting the data. It was

chosen to enable the researcher to compare, contrast and cross-check if the data from one source was backed up by other evidence and construct a more reliable picture (Burns, 2010; and McNiff & Whitehead, 2002). Thus, the instruments utilized in this research were speaking assessments and interview. The range of scoring system for each aspect was started from one to five points. Then, the data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's model of data analysis (1994, as cited in Koshy, 2005) in order to make sense of the data and share the researcher's interpretations with the audience. This model consists of three steps which are interrelated each other, namely: *data reduction, data display,* and *conclusion.*

Data Presentation and Discussion

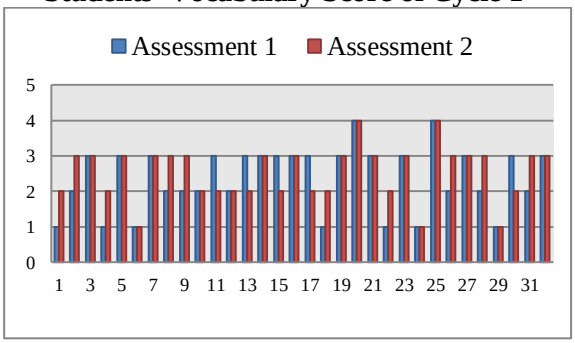
In connection with the aim of this study to identify the improvement of young learners' speaking skill based on the implementation of Theme-Based Teaching, the speaking assessments result reveals that the students' speaking skill improved progressively in every cycle. There are three of five aspects of speaking suggested by Linse (2005) which were examined in this research. The three aspects were chosen for the reason that according to Nunan (2011), they are also the language systems of linguistic competence which are needed in order to be able to speak effectively. Those include (1) *vocabulary:* the system of words; (2) *pronunciation:* the system of sounds; and (3) *grammar:* the system of grammar. Additionally, the data from speaking assessments were confirmed by the students' interview. The data of each assessed aspect in this research is presented separately below in order to give clearer illustration of the improvement of students' speaking skill.

- **Vocabulary**

Based on the data gathered from the assessments, it was discovered that the students' vocabulary mastery largely increased from the first cycle to the second cycle. In order to avoid the vagueness of the data presentation, the data of the students' score in the entire assessments are presented independently per cycle.

To begin with, the students' improvement of vocabulary in Cycle 1 is shown in the following chart.

Chart 1
Students' Vocabulary Score of Cycle 1

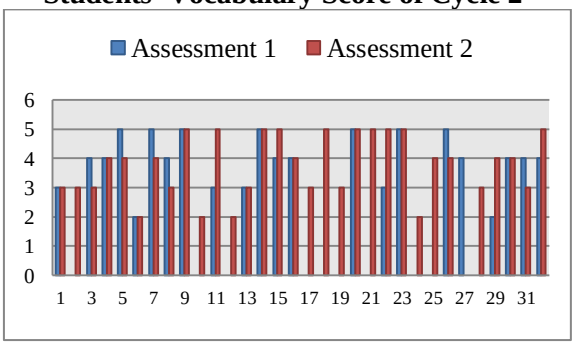


In accordance with Chart 1, it can be seen that the students still got low scores in

Cycle 1. In the first assessment, there were seven students who could not mention anything at all and two students who could mention all vocabularies taught with the teacher's help and reach four as their score. Meanwhile, in the second assessment, the number of students who were still unable to mention anything decreased into three persons although the students who could reach four were still the same persons.

Next, as stated before, the students made higher speaking improvement in Cycle 2. (See Chart 2 to access the detail of the students' vocabulary improvement).

Chart 2
Students' Vocabulary Score of Cycle 2



In Cycle 2, all students had been able to mention some keywords although some of them still mispronounced the words and did not use the expressions. The lowest score reached by the students was two and the highest score was five. It indicates that those who reached the maximum score could mention the vocabularies appropriately related to the meaning they were trying to convey in describing a friend.

The students' interview confirms that their vocabulary mastery improved steadily after being taught by using Theme-Based Teaching. They found new vocabularies related to physical appearance and hobbies through the implementation of Theme-Based Teaching. These statements were determined by the interviewees' ability in mentioning some vocabularies that had been taught under one theme, in this case the theme was "Best Friend".

Additionally, the use of drilling in the learning activities helped the students in mastering vocabularies. It is in line with Nunan (2011) who states that drilling offers opportunities for frequent repetition and recycling of language which are crucial for foreign language development. The type of drilling provided in this research was *repetition drills* which required the students to listen and repeat what the teacher said without making any variations.

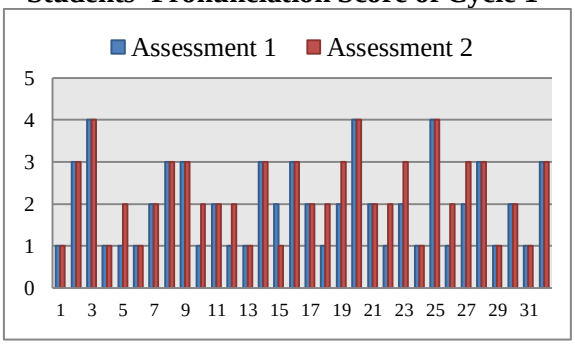
Furthermore, games were also provided in the learning activities in order to introduce the students to new vocabularies. This statement is supported by Harmer (2007) who claims that "there are many games which are appropriate for use with collections of vocabulary items" (p.238).

- **Pronunciation**

Concerning on the students' pronunciation improvement, they had an

excellent progress from the first to the last assessment as the effect of the actions in every cycle. It means that the students' error in pronunciation decreased regularly in every meeting. Chart 3 shows the improvement in the students' pronunciation score in Cycle 1.

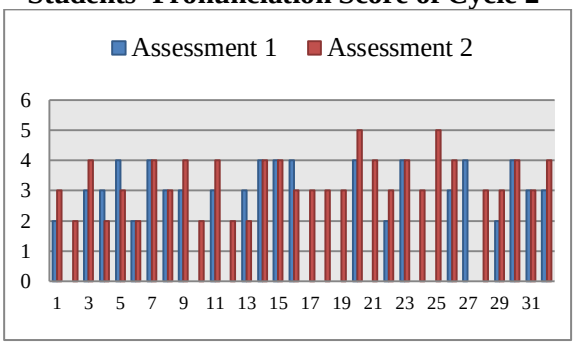
Chart 3
Students' Pronunciation Score of Cycle 1



From Chart 3, it is identified that the students got low scores in Cycle 1 due to the fact that 13 students did not say any single words acceptably in the first assessment. However, in the second assessment, the number of students who got one decreased into eight persons. It confirms that the students made improvement in Cycle 1 although both in the first and second assessment, there were only three students who could reach four, which was the highest score in this cycle.

In spite of this, generally the students made pronunciation improvement in Cycle 2. They increased their score both in the first and second assessment. (See Chart 4 to access the students' pronunciation score in Cycle 2).

Chart 4
Students' Pronunciation Score of Cycle 2



From the data shown in Chart 4, it can be seen that in the first assessment of Cycle 2, all students had been able to pronounce some words and expressions in a better way since there was no student who still got one and nine students reached four. Moreover, in the last meeting there were two students who could get the maximum score in the assessment. It signifies that these two students had been able to pronounce the words or expressions well without mispronouncing any word

The interview result also supports the data from speaking assessments above. The students had been aware about vocal diphthong "aɪ" in the word *likes* well by saying "laɪks". This reality revealed that the students recognized the existence of diphthong in English. It is obviously the basis of improvement in speaking skill in terms of pronunciation.

In this research, the students' pronunciation was not measured using the native speakers' standard. The criterion of the maximum score in the assessments was

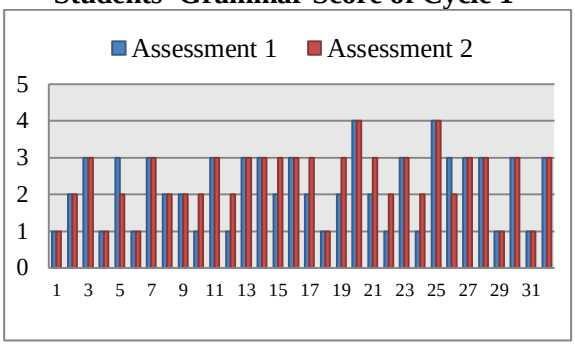
being able to pronunce the words which are acceptable and understandable. It was made with the consideration of the awareness of various accents the students have that will influence their sound production. In addition, it is too early to require seven and eight-year-old students to be native-like in speaking English because they are still incapable of abstract reasoning (Nunan, 2011).

In addition to the process of teaching speaking which included pronunciation, drilling was used in the teaching learning process to familiarize the students with new vocabularies and the way they are pronounced. The teacher could correct the students' mistakes and asked them to repeat the correct pronunciation by drilling. It is in line with Brown (2001, p. 272) who states that "drills offer students an opportunity to listen and to orally repeat certain strings of language that may pose some linguistic difficulty – either phonological or grammatical."

- **Grammar**

As in vocabulary and pronunciation, the students also improved their scores in grammar. Although the improvement was not as big as the two previous aspects, the students' grammar score positively increased from the first assessment to the last assessment. Chart 5 is designed on behalf of presenting the illustration of the students' speaking improvement in terms of grammar in Cycle 1.

Chart 5
Students' Grammar Score of Cycle 1



As shown in Chart 5, in the first assessment, ten students could not say anything by using the language features that had been taught. In addition, only two students could reach four in this first assessment. Later, the number of students who were unable to use grammar decreased into seven persons in the second assessment and three persons could get four.

Going on to the next cycle, the students generally kept on making improvement. They had been able to use expressions in describing a friend. (See Chart 6 to access the detail of the students' grammar improvement in Cycle 2).

Chart 6
Students' Grammar Score of Cycle 2

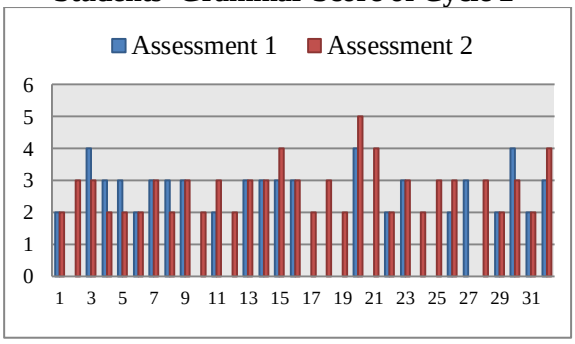


Chart 6 above shows that in Cycle 2, there was no student who still got one point in each assessment. This indicates that all students had been able to use expressions in describing a friend although they still need the teacher's help. Surprisingly, in the last assessment of Cycle 2, there was one student who could reach maximum score and three persons reached four points. It means that student with maximum score could describe a friend without any grammatical error.

The data from interview also implies that the students improved their grammar through the implementation of Theme-Based Teaching. It was found that an interviewee was able to use all the expressions of describing someone perfectly. He was the only one who got the highest score in the last assessment of Cycle 2. This fact indicates that the students' improvement varied based on their own competence. Although the other students made slight improvement in grammar aspect, this student could reach the perfect score.

With regard to the ideas about grammar in teaching speaking to young learners, Theme-Based Teaching has an effect in improving the students' grammar. It is due to the language features which were always reviewed in every meeting to be combined with the new materials. By doing this, the students can slowly but surely memorize the expressions they have learnt. In addition, the teacher also gave explanation and correction to the students' mistakes in using the expressions.

From the explanation of each aspect of speaking skill above, it can be concluded that the meaningful activities have also important role in helping students to improve their speaking skill. The examples of the activities used in this study are drilling and playing games.

Conclusions

This research shows that the implementation of Theme-Based Teaching improved the students' speaking skill. Based on the data from speaking assessments, it was revealed that the students' scores increased gradually in every meeting. The improvement was related to the aspects of speaking assessed in this research, including vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar.

In terms of vocabulary, Theme-Based Teaching obviously enhanced the students' vocabularies through the activities conducted in the learning process, especially the repetition drills and vocabulary games. The students could memorize the words that they found from the games and use them appropriately to describe a friend. In terms of pronunciation,

it was also found that the students could pronounce the expressions better and better as the effect of drilling that was done in every meeting. The students were given examples of pronouncing words and expressions before being asked to use them. They could pronounce consonant (ʃ) in "she" and "short" and diphthong (aɪ) in "likes". In terms of grammar, the students had been able to distinguish the use of pronouns "he" and "she" in describing a friend. They were not confused to use "he" for describing a boy and use "she" for describing a girl.

References

Brown, H.D. (2001). *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy, Second Edition.* New York: Addison Wesley Longman Inc.

Burns, A. (2010). *Doing Action Research in English Language Teaching A Guide for Practitioners.* New York: Routledge.

Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching Languages to Young Learners.* United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

Damayanti, I. L. (2010). A child-friendly way to teaching young learners the implementation of M-U-F framework. FPBS UPI: Unpublished.

Ferrance, E. (2000). *Themes in Education: Action Research*. United States: Brown University.

Harmer, J. (1991). *The Practice of English Language Teaching, New Edition.* United Kingdom: Cambridge.

Harmer, J. (2007). *The Practice of English Language Teaching.* United Kingdom: Pearson Education Limited.

Koshy, V. (2005). *Action Research for Improving Practice A Practical Guide.* London: A SAGE Publication Company.

Linse, C. T. (2005). *Practical English Language Teaching: Young Learners.* New York: McGraw-Hill Inc.

McNiff, J & Whitehead, J. (2002). *Action Research: Principles and Practice Second Edition.* London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Nazara, S. (2011). Students' perception on EFL speaking skill development. *Journal of English Teaching, Issn 2080 9628, Volume 1, Number 1, February 2011*.

Nunan, D. (2011). *Teaching English to Young Learners.* USA: Anaheim University Press.

Scott, W. A. & Ytrberg, L. H. (1990). *Teaching English to Children.* New York: Longman.

What are Thematic Teaching and Curriculum Integration. (2012, June). Retrieved from: http://www.todaysteacher.com/ThematicTeaching.htm.