

## **Bridging the students' ability gap to create a conducive atmosphere in learning English through various communication activities**

Aminah

Parahikmah Institute of Indonesia, Gowa, South Sulawesi, Indonesia

\*e-mail: amhy12faezakun@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

This study aims to get a detailed reason for collaborative communication activities in bridging the gaps in the perspective of the students in the classroom condition to create a conducive atmosphere in learning English. This study applied explorative qualitative study. The participants of this study are the second-semester students of English Literature Program in one of the universities in Makassar, South Sulawesi Indonesia. The data were collected through Myres-Briggs online questionnaire, interview, and classroom observation. The results of data analysis showed that the collaborative communication activities which can bridge the students' gaps in their perspectives should be fun and collaborative. Also, this study showed that varied activities could be applied alternately in learning interaction and adjusted with the material taught with attractive teaching media. By the gap issue, it was also found that distinctive personality and personal interests caused the gap. This study also found classroom conditions in students' point of view which could create conducive atmosphere physically and psychologically in learning English.

### **Keywords:**

Collaborative communication activities; conducive atmosphere; classroom condition

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Students are one of perennial elements of EFL teaching and learning. Also, all of them have a different identity, background, personality, motivation, and ability. Most of the students who come with those different factors are included. The participants are from 'heterogeneous' background with different levels of proficiency. Sometimes, the gaps occurred during teaching and learning process due to distinguishing factors. For instance, the high ability students tend to be more enthusiastic, extroverted, talkative, confident, and active to get high scores or the lecturers' attention compared to the poor ability who tend to act the vice versa. The typical problem such as family background, feeling lazy, introverted owing to lack of progress also become the other factors. Hence the factors mentioned trigger the gaps within the classes and made the atmosphere of the class is not conducive.

However, I only focused on personality factor as one of the causes of the gaps occurred in the class. Theoretically, the personality test was conducted based on Myres-Briggs test result to get objective information about their personality. It indicates that there are personality type indicators which commonly referred to as the "Myres-Briggs test" questionnaire. It includes 1)

introversion versus extroversion, 2) sensing versus intuition, 3) thinking versus feeling, 4) judging versus perceiving. Every personality has its strategies in the learning process.

The harmony and the conducive environment perceived by the students affect the teaching and learning process. Therefore the classroom management which has a conducive atmosphere plays a vital role for the students during learning, especially in EFL classroom. Motivations, interests, and needs are widely recognized as important factors in language learning success. It is important for lecturers to create a relaxed, positive atmosphere in the classroom to create a good learning situation. In order to create a good environment in the learning process, it is essential for the lecturers to form a good relationship between themselves and the students.

In teaching and learning process, the lecturer acts as a manager in managing the class. Classroom management is a pivotal requirement to ensure effective teaching and to learn to take place in promoting a favorable mood or atmosphere in the classroom (Gibb, 2002; Lim et al., 2003). Collaborative and good atmosphere in learning interaction should be there in order to improve students' involvement one another in understanding each lesson. According to Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2013), the lecturer is a facilitator for the students' learning. A lecturer is a manager of classroom activities in which her/his responsibility is to establish a situation likely to promote communication in learning interaction.

Moreover, communication strategies as the main issue could be alternative activities which prompt the students to work together and to find out some new ideas in doing the assignment or to help the poor students in understanding the assignments given by the lecturer. Thus, in giving the task, Tomlinson (2011) suggested dealing with the term of assignment which commonly encountered to meaning-focused work, such as projects, problem-solving, and simulations. There are three critical aspects of giving those tasking for instance by noticing a process which students and teachers are to go, classroom participation concerning with whom the students are to work, and contents that the students are to focus. In performing the assignment given to the students, the key aspects can be elaborated by managing the classroom into pair work, group work, even individual work.

Students in a classroom come from distinguishing background. Svård (2007) revealed that the best way to deal with the problem is to bring back ability grouping. The differentiation and motivation instead in managing the individual difference in the classroom were found in the literature they read. A good atmosphere, clear instructions, structure and setting routines were claimed from both the literature and the teachers. They were categorized as the most important factors when working with this kind of class.

In general, Johnson (1999) pointed out that communication is an ongoing process of sending and receiving messages that enable humans to share knowledge, attitudes, and skills. The communication activities could engage the students to be more interactive and cooperative in the classroom. Lewis, Newell, and Withall (1961) revealed that classroom interaction has a series of communication acts namely verbal and non-verbal between teachers and

students. Some activities can be engaged in the classroom, and the teacher can give any instructions by implementing any communication acts which are suitable for the condition.

Every person has a different personality. Also, it influences human's attitude and behavior in daily life. In 1923, to find out the kinds of personality, Carl Jung set up the questionnaires called the Myres-Briggs test (Quenk, 2009). There had been a tremendous way of interests in Western society at that time, in the relationship between personality type and one's success in a career, management of time, academic pursuits, in marriage, in child-rearing, and other contexts. The test can find out their personality description in detail (Brown, 2000).

## **2 METHOD**

### **2.1 The Design of the Study**

This research employed the explorative research design in a qualitative approach. It described the students' perspectives on collaborative communication activities and classroom condition they prefer to reduce the gap among them. In line with this, Mills and Gay (2015) argued that descriptive research is useful for investigating a variety of educational problems and issues. He also defined a qualitative research as the collection, analysis, and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual (non-numerical) data in order to gain insights into a particular phenomenon of the interest.

### **2.2 Participants of the Study**

The population of this research consisted of the second-semester students of the English Literature Department in one of the universities in Makassar, South Sulawesi Indonesia. I chose only one class consisting of 13 active students as the representatives of the participants of the study due to a case study concerning about the gaps. Furthermore, this class was chosen because they had completed their English subjects in the first semester and it was hypothesized that the gap sometimes occurred in this class especially in learning interaction. The information obtained from the preliminary study performed through the previous observation and interview. I selected purposively the sample as participants of this study. The third-semester students were chosen to explore the gap occurred in the classroom should be bridged to create a conducive atmosphere in learning.

### **2.3 Data Collection**

I employed four kinds of instruments namely online questionnaire, interview, observation, and documentation. The description is explained as follows:

#### **2.3.1 Online Questionnaire**

The online questionnaire was used to gain the objective information about students' personality through "Myres-Briggs test (Quenk, 2009)." The participants used their gadgets and did the test. I explained what to do, asked them to finish the test in a few minutes, and submitted the result. It was conducted when the students had their spare time in lecture days, and it depended on the agreement between I and the respondents.

### 2.3.2 Interview

In this study, I used an in-depth semi-structured interview to the informants. The interviews were some open-ended questions which entailed recording regarding various collaborative communication activities and conducive classroom conditions based on their perspectives. Besides, the interview related to classroom condition was referred to MCAP (My Classroom Assessment Protocol) which has been used in some International Journals. The interview was also conducted in the students' spare time while waiting for the next lecture to study. Thus, it depends on the appointment made by the students.

### 2.3.3 Observation

I conducted earlier observation for pre-research by assuming that different personality caused the gap. However, the next observation was implemented due to different fact obtained during the study. The second observation aims to gain the data related to what kind of various communication activities applied by the lecture to be compared with the students' opinion. It was conducted during the lecture especially in speaking class at least three times.

### 2.3.4 Documentation

In line with observation, interview, and questionnaire, information was also gathered through documentary evidence. The documents such as portfolio and files were helpful in verifying the substantial information of the students. Similarly, it could provide other specific details to corroborate information from other sources such as their achievement scores from the previous semester and specific lecture lesson plan. I examined the files and portfolios concerning the research.

## 3 RESULT

The results of the data analysis from the data collected through the online questionnaire, interviews and classroom observation. Based on the data analysis obtained from the interview, supported by classroom observations, I found that the collaborative communication activities which bridge the gaps among heterogeneous students in learning interaction regarding the students' perspectives are listed in the following Table 1:

Table 1 below indicates the collaborative communication activities preferred by the students. There are some supporting ideas which support the collaborative communication activities such as learning interaction, students' profiles, and teaching media in reducing the gap. I found that there were some classroom conditions in students' perspectives which can create a conducive atmosphere in learning English as well. Meanwhile, the classroom conditions include (1) the physical condition of the class, (2) the importance of the attribute of the class, (3) the other factors creating good atmosphere physically and psychologically, and (4) anticipating the class condition problems faced by the students. The discussion of these characteristics is given in the following lines.

Table 1. Reason for choosing the communication activity

No.	Kinds of communication Activities	The number of interviewees who prefer it	The reason for choosing the communication activity
1.	Icebreakers	Seven interviewees	Collaborative and fun
2.	Storytelling	Five interviewees	Collaborative
3.	Information gap	Five interviewees	Collaborative
4.	Roleplay ICT mediated	Four interviewees	Collaborative and fun
5.	communication activities	Three interviewees	Collaborative and fun
6.	Making a group project	Three interviewees	Collaborative and fun
7.	Literacy development The other (additional activities):	Two interviewees	Collaborative
	Discussion	5 interviewees	Collaborative
	Traveling/ outdoor class activity	Interviewee	Collaborative and fun
8.	Study Club	Interviewee	Collaborative and fun
	Grouping in every lecturer with different friends	One interviewee	Collaborative
	Outdoor assignments	One interviewee	Collaborative and fun
	Debate	Two interviewees	Collaborative

## 4 DISCUSSION

### 4.1 The Collaborative Communication Activities

Dealing with the interviews and classroom observations, I found out that referring to the students' perspectives; there are some collaborative communication activities which can reduce the gap among them. I let the students choose some options provided about the communication activities. Likewise, the students were allowed to have their suggestions about them. There are some communication activities which are I offered, namely role play, information gap, jumbled story, problem-solving, icebreakers, ICT mediated communication activities, story-telling, making a group project, and literacy development.

Besides from observation conducted by using field note to compare the students' perspectives and the interview about collaborative communication activities implemented by the lecturer, it was revealed that the lecturer, especially in speaking subject, applied speaking practices individually for two meetings to talk about their experience and the meaning of best friend. Also, in the other two meetings, the lecturer asked the students to do discussion under the title "*video game impact to the children*" and debate under the title "*Is Indonesia threatened by the existence of English?*" In the last two meetings, the lecturer asked the students to do story-telling and role-play

Furthermore, it was found that the collaborative communication activities preferred by the students can be done during learning interaction and outside of the class to make them more collaborative one another to minimize the gap among them. Communicative activities cover various activities that encourage and engage learners in communicating and sharing with other students (Akib, Haryanto, Iskandar, & Patak, 2018; Nunan, 1989), and with community or people they meet in their daily life. It also has real aims in sharing information, breaking down barriers among them, and discussing themselves and any issues around them. To assist the English classroom into an active, safe, and enjoyable place where literacy and beginners can study what they need and want to study, the lecturer can offer well-designed and well-executed communicative activities in teaching and learning process (Richards, 2005; Savignon, 1991).

The enjoyable situation can make the students feel fun in learning, and the gap among them can be reduced as well (Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Lei, Cohen, & Russler, 2010). The additional activities namely study club, outdoor class activity, discussion, debate, and so on can also be conducted outside of the classroom. They also have contributions in making the students get closer one another. Besides, it is also revealed that most of the students prefer learning in a group because they can help and share one another. Since they have a different preference in learning interaction. Besides in giving the task or the assignment which commonly encountered to meaning-focused work, for instance, projects, problem-solving, and simulations. Thus in applying the task given to the students, the key aspects can be elaborated by managing the classroom into pair work, group work, even individual work. It can be adjusted with the material which the lecturer is going to teach. The key aspects can be combined one another when teaching a subject since the students have different interests in learning.

By the online questionnaire about personality test based on the Myers-Briggs test, it was found that the students have a different kind of personality. From the data obtained, it showed that the students have a different personality. Surprisingly even though some of them have the same personality, but they do not gather in the same group. They have distinctive concerns about being interested in academic pursuit, social media, or personal interest. The personal interests entail privacy problems, family cases, or social media topics to discuss. It was also obtained from the data that one of the students, who are a high achiever, became the most favorite character in the class. The 'heterogeneous' classes are terms used to describe classes made up of students of different levels, different strengths, weaknesses, and approaches to learning. These characteristics I found in the class of the subject research. Therefore, as the students have different strengths, learning style, and interests, the lecturer can modify the variety of teaching. Thus by modifying the variety of teaching the different or the same personality can meet one another (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002).

## 4.2 Classroom Condition

### 4.2.1 The physical condition of the class

Referring to the interview about classroom condition, it can be obtained that the physical condition of the class includes the temperature control, air quality, light quality, equipment order and quality, size, wall writing surface (whiteboard), and space for computers or laptops in the classroom. Most of the students think that they are in good condition except in specific occurrences. Furthermore, the effect of the weather's change occasionally influences the students when they learn i.e. if the air conditioner is broken or when there is heavy rain, its sound gets through the three-ply wall. However overall it can be managed because the air conditioners are fixed and most of the walls of the building are made of bricks. Building deficiencies impair the quality of teaching and learning and contribute to the health and safety problems of staff and students. Building design and facility conditions have also been associated with lecturer motivation and student achievement (Astin, 1984). For example, classroom lighting and thermal comfort are commonly cited by lecturers as determinants of their morale and the engagement of their students.

### 4.2.2 The importance of the attribute of the class

Based on the interview, the attribute of the classroom seems to be essential to show in order to improve the students' motivation and interest in learning. The attribute of the classroom makes the class look attractive. Therefore the students are eager to notice them owing to it is related to literature. It contains the pictures of the literature experts, vocabularies, group project, phrases in English, and English quotes. Though it has not been there yet, the new building will provide classes special for literature department. Thus it can be implemented well if there are participations between the students and the lecturers.

To create a conducive atmosphere the lecturers should be able to organize classroom owing to it requires a good time management skill and it had better have an appealing physical classroom environment. Conducive atmosphere means to enhance the learning process entailing classroom management (Dörnyei, 2007; Gibb, 2002; Lim et al., 2003), which means improving it more than just maintaining strict and rigid control over the content of the class which means establishing a comfortable environment by allowing everyone to learn, interact, and participate freely.

### 4.2.3 The other factors creating a good atmosphere

The data from the interview showed that there are some factors which can create good atmosphere instead of the points mentioned before. Those are related to physical and psychological factors for the students for instance what makes them always come to study at a campus, want to leave the lecture, enhance their motivation in learning, make them challenging to study, be satisfied in learning, and factors are causing some intermittent health problem. The way the lecturer delivers the lesson affects the students' attention. When he/she talks one way without interacting with them, it causes being annoyed. Likewise, the output of the lesson should be useful for them to implement. Even the physical condition of the class, for instance, the fade color of the wall,

the broken AC, the scratch on the wall bothers the students, but the lecturer plays a vital role to create a conducive atmosphere in learning.

Thus it is inferred from the data that sometimes classroom condition or good atmosphere does not always depend on the class condition physically, but it is from the other factors such as the lecturer, friends, motivation, and satisfaction. When the lecturer teaches in a fun and creative way, it will create more conducive atmosphere psychologically for the students. Hence the classroom management plays an essential role in TEFL in creating good atmosphere due to it is a pivotal linchpin and the lecturer jokes can improve the students' mood during learning interaction.

There is a strong connection between a good classroom atmosphere and managing good behavior in teaching (Van Tartwijk, den Brok, Veldman, & Wubbels, 2009). It will create a good learning situation as well. In order to create a good environment, it is vital for the lecturers to form a good relationship between themselves and the students for examples learning the students' names as quickly as possible, as well as learn about their life backgrounds, what they like or they hate, their strengths and weaknesses. This should be started as early as possible in a new course, for example by asking the students to write about themselves in a diary the lecturer gives feedback or comments related to their story. This makes the students feel looked upon as individuals and promotes a good relationship between them. Similarly, they discovered that it was necessary for the lecturer working in a mixed ability class to create a good atmosphere where the students feel secure, can voice their opinions and ask questions without feeling anxious. The literature they read also brought up this point as a vital element to focus on when working in mixed-ability classes.

#### 4.2.4 Anticipating the class condition problems faced by the students

Anticipating the class condition problems faced by the students is the most critical element to evaluate. From the data obtained, it was revealed that the students feel sick or annoyed owing to the class condition which bothers them in learning. It can be caused by the broken facilities, the wooden floor, the noise, and the smoke of cigarettes. Therefore the bureaucracy should notice or anticipate the class condition problems faced by the students by giving strict regulation in every classroom and by maintaining the building and the facilities at the campus. Therefore the Head of the campus and the bureaucracy should insist upon a positive maintenance program to keep the building in a good state of repair or maintenance and clean condition.

Also, there are some classroom conditions in students' point of view which will create a conducive atmosphere in learning English. The classroom conditions include (1) the physical condition of the class i.e. the temperature control, air quality, light quality, equipment order and quality, size, wall writing surface (whiteboard), and space for computers or laptops in the classroom which are in good condition, (2) the importance of the attribute of the class for instance the class project and any other things related to literature, (3) the other factors which are physically and psychologically can create good atmosphere namely the lecturer, friends, motivation, and satisfaction, and (4) anticipating the class condition problems faced by the students i.e. preventing



conditions which make them sick and by maintaining the facilities and the building especially in the classroom.

## 5 CONCLUSION

This study found that if the collaborative communication activities regarding the students' perspectives are implemented in a fun and collaborative way, the gaps among them are reduced. The varied activities can be applied alternately in learning interaction and adjusted with the material taught especially in speaking subject. They are performed individually, in pairs, and in a group as what the informants suggested. Besides different personality and personal interest factors which cause the gap was reduced by doing those activities. The appealing teaching media which make learning more fun in the mixed ability class also have a good contribution in boosting the students' motivation in learning English.

Furthermore, there are some classroom conditions in students' point of view which create a conducive atmosphere in learning English including the physical condition of the class, the existence of the class attributes, and the other factors which physically and psychologically can create a good atmospheres such as the lecturer, friends, motivation, and satisfaction. Anticipating the class condition problems faced by the students should be noticed as well by the bureaucracy. Hence, if the classroom conditions are good and the atmosphere is conducive, the students will be much better in learning interaction.

The lecturers can apply the collaborative communication activities when the gaps occur in the classroom or apply them as alternative approaches in teaching specific materials. The lecturers should provide more exciting media in teaching, modify the learning interaction among the students, and be more interactive with the students. The bureaucracy of the campus should give strict regulation in using the classroom with its facilities by banning the students to smoke in the class, scratching the facilities, and using the electricity as wise as possible. Maintaining the building and its facilities should be noticed as well. The future researchers are suggested to investigate the gaps occurred in different aspects especially in TEFL learning interaction.

## REFERENCES

- Akib, M., Haryanto, H., Iskandar, I., & Patak, A. A. (2018). Investigating the motivation, participation, and achievement of students. *International Journal of Humanities and Innovation (IJHI)*, 1(2), 17–27.
- Astin, A. W. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 25(4), 297–308.
- Blumenfeld, P. C., Soloway, E., Marx, R. W., Krajcik, J. S., Guzdial, M., & Palincsar, A. (1991). Motivating project-based learning: Sustaining the doing, supporting the learning. *Educational Psychologist*, 26(3–4), 369–398.
- Brown, H. D. (2000). *Principles of language learning and teaching*. New York: Longman.
- Byram, M., Gribkova, B., & Starkey, H. (2002). Developing the intercultural dimension in language teaching. *A Practical Introduction for Teachers*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

- Dörnyei, Z. (2007). Creating a motivating classroom environment. In *International handbook of English language teaching* (pp. 719–731). Springer.
- Gibb, A. (2002). Creating conducive environments for learning and entrepreneurship: living with, dealing with, creating and enjoying uncertainty and complexity. *Industry and Higher Education*, 16(3), 135–148.
- Johnson, M. B. (1999). *Communication in the Classroom*.
- Larsen-Freeman, D., & Anderson, M. (2013). *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching 3rd edition - Oxford Handbooks for Language Teachers*. Oxford University Press.
- Lei, S. A., Cohen, J. L., & Russler, K. M. (2010). Humor on Learning in the College Classroom: Evaluating Benefits and Drawbacks From Instructors' Perspectives. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 37(4).
- Lewis, W. W., Newell, J. M., & Withall, J. (1961). An analysis of classroom patterns of communication. *Psychological Reports*, 9(2), 211–219.
- Lim, C. P., Teo, Y. H., Wong, P., Khine, M. S., Chai, C. S., & Divaharan, S. (2003). Creating a conducive learning environment for the effective integration of ICT: Classroom management issues. *Journal of Interactive Learning Research*, 14(4), 405–423.
- Mills, G. E., & Gay, L. R. (2015). *Educational Research: Competencies for Analysis and Applications*. Pearson. Retrieved from <https://www.amazon.com/Educational-Research-Competencies-Applications-Standalone/dp/0133972062>
- Nunan, D. (1989). *Designing tasks for the communicative classroom*. Cambridge University Press.
- Quenk, N. L. (2009). *Essentials of Myers-Briggs type indicator assessment* (Vol. 66). John Wiley & Sons.
- Richards, J. C. (2005). *Communicative language teaching today*. SEAMEO Regional Language Centre.
- Savignon, S. J. (1991). Communicative language teaching: State of the art. *TESOL Quarterly*, 25(2), 261–278.
- Svärd, A.-C. (2007). The challenge of mixed-ability classes: How should upper secondary English teachers work in order to help the weaker students?
- Tomlinson, B. (2011). *Materials Development in Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
- Van Tartwijk, J., den Brok, P., Veldman, I., & Wubbels, T. (2009). Teachers' practical knowledge about classroom management in multicultural classrooms. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25(3), 453–460.