THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ABILITY GROUPING IN ENGLISH CLASSROOM IN SMK NEGERI 1 SINGOSARI

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ABSTRACT: This qualitative study is intended to describe the implementation of ability grouping in English classes in SMKN 1 Malang. The result shows that ability grouping aimed at improving English teaching and students’ English competence, a writing test was used as the placement test, the ability grouping was divided into four sessions, the language skills were taught separately, the course design was the same across levels, the activities in ability grouping were similar to those in non ability grouping classes, but various treatment was given based on the students’ characteristic in each level, and the students responded positively to ability grouping.

Key words: ability grouping, vocational high school

SMK Negeri 1 Singosari (henceforth SMKN 1 Singosari) is a vocational high school which adapts a teaching technique named ability grouping to equip the students with the ability to communicate well using English and develop their vocational skills to reach the goal of equipping the students with competitive ability in the international level. This ability grouping system is applied in English classes in grade XI and XII in SMKN 1 Singosari.

Ability grouping is defined as a group arrangement in which the students are differentiated in their class placement based on academic capacity (Kulik and Arbor, 1992). Slavin (1990) states that ability grouping is made for creating more homogeneous ability group in the organization of classroom or school. Other experts, Adodo and Agbayewa (2011) believes that ability grouping is “the practice of dividing students for instruction on the basis of their perceived capacities for learning”. As a conclusion, ability grouping is organizing students based on their learning ability.

A recent study by Michael Kintz (2011) on ability grouping in elementary schools reveals that the ability grouping classes bring positive and negative impact to the students as they study in higher level institution. Adodo and Agbayewa (2011) also did an experimental research on differences between grouping and non-grouping students in science classroom in a junior high school.
in Nigeria. Similar research on grouping ability, particularly in English classes in a vocational high school, had not been done. Therefore, the researcher conducted a study on the application of ability grouping for English classes in SMKN 1 Singosari.

The objective of this study is to describe the implementation of ability grouping in English classes in SMKN 1 Singosari. This problem is then specified into these sub-questions: (1) what is the aim of the implementation of ability grouping?, (2) what are the practices of ability grouping?, and (3) what are the students’ opinions toward the implementation of ability grouping classes?

METHOD

The design of this research is descriptive qualitative that focuses on investigating the implementation of ability grouping in English classes in SMKN 1 Singosari grade XI and the teachers who taught those classes. The researcher chose grade XI because English subject in grade X did not employ ability grouping and grade XII was in the preparation for national examination. The researcher took some classes in grade XI and the teachers who taught those classes. The data were taken by using interview guide, questionnaire, observation sheet, field note, and document analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

In the interview, the curriculum advisor and teachers stated that the aim of ability grouping was to enhance the quality of English teaching and learning. Ability grouping also allowed each group of students not to speed up or slow down their learning because they were grouped with the students with similar ability. The teachers said that a tendency of boredom appeared when the more capable students in heterogeneous class had to listen to the explanation for less capable students and waited for them to understand the explanation. These more capable students, then, tended to disturb other students in the teaching learning process. The ability grouping is one of the solutions to match the need and the level of lesson given by the teachers. This does not mean that the students in
lower level obtained much easier task. They were, instead, given step by step task to ease them in the learning process.

**The Placement Test**

To know students’ level of ability in ability grouping classes, the school applied placement test in the form of multiple-choice and writing test. However, because of some weaknesses of the multiple-choice test in the previous years, in the 2011/2012 academic year, only the writing test was used to measure the 11th grade students’ ability. In the writing test, the students were given several topics, from which they chose one to be developed into an essay. The writing test was used because it was a complete test by which students’ grammar and vocabulary competence could be assessed. In the test, the students worked independently and could not cheat because of the limited time given. The teachers allowed the students to use a dictionary, and many students opened *Google Translate*. The teacher argued that although the students used *Google Translate*, the originality of their works could be easily identified from the diction and the grammar they used.

**The Grouping Arrangement**

The students in the school were grouped based on their learning ability with some modification. The students from nine departments were divided into four groups that represented four meeting (see Table 1). Those groups were named Elementary because based on the 2006 Standard of Content, grade 11 of vocational high school belonged to elementary level of English proficiency.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Class Distribution</th>
<th>Majors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday 1-4</td>
<td>E1, E2, E3, E4, E5, E6, E7, GB 1, KB 1-2, SP, MI 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monday 7-10</td>
<td>E1, E2, E3, E4, E5, E6, E7, GB 2, OTR 4, OI 2, AB 2, MI 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuesday 5-8</td>
<td>E1, E2, E3, E4, E5</td>
<td>AB 1, OI 1, OTR 2, OTR 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thursday 1-4</td>
<td>E1, E2, E3, E4, E5</td>
<td>OTR 1, TITL 1-2, TPm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each major classroom contained approximately 30 students while the classes with ability grouping contained approximately 20 students. Therefore, the
larger the number of students in a session the more ability grouping classes were made. The advantages given by this modification was that the teachers could create small classes so that the teacher could get more focused in the teaching process.

In this school, students were also given English for engineering for all majors. The teaching of English in grade 11 still focused on English for Special Purpose (ESP), yet the material was directed to general engineering. The teachers would give more explanation about the materials when there were differences in technical terms. The weaknesses here was that the teaching of ESP could not be taught deeply based on each students’ different major classes or departments. The limited teaching source and teachers’ knowledge of certain major were also the teachers’ biggest obstacles.

The Student Placement

The teaching system in ability grouping classes in SMKN 1 Singosari prioritized the teaching of language skills. The teaching of skills in ability grouping classes employed teaching team. Thus, one class was taught by two or three teachers with each teacher taught one language skill.

In the teaching of separated English language skills, level E1 to E3 was taught by three teachers while  E4 and E5 were taught by two teachers. To avoid confusing time allotment for the teaching of separated skills, the schedule was carefully arranged. For the teachers in E1 to E3, one teacher taught the same class every three weeks. In E4 and E5, one teacher taught the same classroom every two weeks.

The home room teachers criticized this teaching arrangement for its complexity in the collection of final score at the end of semester and the remedial teaching process. When the students had low score and had to do a remedial activity, they had to contact the teacher who taught that skill. That process was rather problematic because in most situations, the homeroom teacher was the one who tried hard to contact the teacher the problem instead of the students who had the problem. Most students had low awareness to solve their own academic problem.
The advantages offered by this design were that the teachers could focus on teaching and assessing one skill in a time; in addition, it minimized the tendency to teach grammar and reading excessively. Students were given the same portion to learn all skills. Unfortunately, the disadvantage was in yielding the students’ final score. Here the students rarely tried to access their scores to know whether they still needed some remedy for certain skill. The students’ lack of learning awareness burdened the home room teacher who was responsible for the reporting the students’ learning report.

The Course Design

The syllabus in SMKN 1 Singosari was developed from the 2006 Standard of Content. In developing the teaching and learning materials, the teachers combined general English and English for engineering. Then, the syllabus was elaborated in lesson plans. The lesson plans used non-modified course design, which means that the same lesson plans were used for all classes although the teachers taught classes which cover different levels. The teachers reasoned that it was conducted in that way because the material used for different levels was the same and the students had to pass the same passing grade. The students also learned the same material from the English modules developed by the teachers regardless of their levels.

The Teaching and Learning Process

The teaching and learning process in ability grouping was the same as the teaching and learning process in non-ability grouping classes. The observation revealed that most of the teachers used Exploration, Elaboration, and Confirmation (EEC) in teaching.

The difference lay on the teachers’ strategy in handling the students and giving the additional material for higher and lower groups. The observations revealed that in the lower groups, the teachers frequently raised a question in the middle of learning process to ensure that the students understood and were engaged in the classroom activities. Next, the difficulty was found in the effort to make the students speak up. The teachers solved this problem usually by
rephrasing their questions. The students’ problem, especially in lower groups, came from the use of target language in classroom. Most of the teachers spoke English in most of the teaching and learning process so that some students were hardly engaged in the learning process.

In addition to that, this school allocated four lesson hours in one meeting. Consequently, the students only had one meeting per week for English classes. This arrangement was taken to avoid the problem in distributing time allotment and rooms for other subjects.

**The Students’ Opinion toward the Implementation of Ability Grouping**

The questionnaire revealed that most of the students had positive perception about ability grouping (see Table 2). Most students felt that ability grouping was beneficial for their learning and socialization because it gave them new learning atmosphere. The attention of the teachers in small classes helped them learn English better. In addition, the teachers’ willingness to help them by giving extended time outside the regular lesson time to have test and remedial tasks gave students more time to prepare themselves and increase students’ trust to the teacher.

According to the students, the ability grouping in the school was good because 1) it varied the teaching of English; 2) small classes helped them learn more easily; 3) the students could assess their ability by comparing themselves with students from other departments; and 4) the students got many friends from other departments. Concerning the weaknesses of ability grouping, the students listed the following downside of the program, such as 1) students were discriminated by the implementation of grouping; 2) students were separated from their classmates of the same major; 3) students got difficulty in having the remedial test because more than one teacher taught in one class; and 4) students got confused with the schedule of the ability grouping classes.

For this ability grouping, the students gave several suggestions. First, the placement test had to measure students’ ability with higher reliability. Also, the teachers had to monitor the test. They also suggested that the lesson be taught in two hours per meeting so it would be two meetings per week. Others suggestions
was about the need to have break time within the four-hour sessions. In accordance to the previous question about the teacher’s placement, some students argued that three teachers in one class were too many. According to them, two teachers in one class were enough. Other suggestions simply stated that this system was good and should be continued. In contrast, other students in their comments said that they did not need ability grouping and it should be stopped.

Discussion

Placement Test

In grouping the students by ability, the teachers used a free writing test. According to Brown (2004), free writing employs writers’ knowledge in using vocabulary, grammar, discourse, and all principles and guideline in a piece of writing yet the students are given more freedom to choose the topic, length, style, etc. Assessing a piece of writing is more than grammar and punctuation, and the content of the writing is more important (Connors and Glenn, 1995). The result of the writing test was evaluated using scoring rubric which consequently needed longer time to do, and teachers’ subjectivity was possibly could not be avoided. Brown (2004) states that writing test should be given longer time because it is not an instant process. It starts from writing the draft and doing some revisions before it comes to the final product. In addition, actually, the teachers should have not allowed the students to use dictionary in the placement test. Vocabulary knowledge is one part which is being scored; therefore the use of dictionary will reduce the reliability of the test.

Grouping Arrangement

The grouping in this school was based on the students’ academic capability to create more homogeneous groups in terms of their achievement. The advantage of this system is students learned in small classes. It is in line with Davies and Pearse (2000) who argues that creating a good achievement in large group students is more difficult than a small group.
The Teachers’ Placement

Brown (2007) defines integrated skills teaching as teaching process which covers four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Harmer (2007) states that integrating different skills is actually done to imitate the use of language naturally in daily life. Teaching language skills in integrated way is more ideal since one skill cannot be separated from the use of others skills.

However, the teaching of integrated skills in daily teaching is not always ideal. The teachers in SMKN 1 Singosari found that the integrated skill teaching process tended to explore one skill only excessively. Many teachers often taught reading and grammar excessively, and paid less attention to listening and speaking skills.

Brown (2007) states that the teaching of separate skills may be best adapted for high intermediate to advanced level such as in university in improving certain specialized skills. In this school, however, the teaching of separate skills was done for the students of this school who were categorized in the elementary level in terms of their English proficiency. Teaching separated English skills in SMKN 1 Singosari can still be done well as long as the material given suits the students’ need. In ability grouping classes, the teacher focused to teach the students balanced English skills for the vocational purposes. Therefore, by teaching the language skills separately, the teachers expect the excessive teaching of certain skill only can be decreased and the students will learn all skills in a balanced portion.

The Course Design

The teachers’ made syllabus and lesson plan in SMKN 1 Singosari met the experts’ criteria and the Standard of Process. Brown (2007) and Harmer (2007) state that a syllabus must cover at least the goals, objectives, list of purposes, topics and situation that matches with the function of it, what material to be taught, list of skills employed, references to a textbook or any sources, and assessment. In Indonesia, the course design must follow what is written in the 2007 Standard of Process. The lesson is developed from the syllabus. The lesson plan has to mention the lesson’s identity, standard of competence, basic
competence, indicator, learning objective, teaching material, time allocation, teaching methodology, activities, assessment, and reference.

Unfortunately, the findings showed that the course design given across different levels was the same design without modification. Kulik and Arbor (1990) called that as ‘grouping without curricular adjustment’. This practice is proven to bring ineffective learning result in most ability grouping classes in USA in which the effect to the learning result was quite small. The teachers in the school carefully divided the students into separated groups but did not differentiate their learning instructions.

This practice is not in line with Harmer’s suggestion (2007). Harmer states that the teacher must carefully match the learning activity between the task and topics to the different groups they teach. Brown (2007) points out that need analysis is a concern in developing a curriculum design. The teacher will know the missing gap in the students’ ability and the course given would be successful in filling the gaps. To conclude, the course design should be adjusted to the characteristic of the students, especially in ability grouping where different classes represent different levels. In the school, as the teachers decided to use the materials across different levels ability because the students had to pass the same passing grade, the teachers should have employed teaching techniques and activities that can cover the students’ different needs.

**The Teaching and Learning Process**

The teaching and learning process was in line with the statement in Standard of Process 2007. According to the standard, the teaching activities are divided into pre, whilst, and post activities. Pre activity is used to prepare the students to be ready in learning activity by giving brainstorming and information about the topic. Whilst activity which covers interactive, fun, and challenging teaching methodology can be carried out using some teaching techniques such as EEC (Exploration, Elaboration, Confirmation). Last, in the post activity, the teachers give feedback, assessment, and the next teaching activity.

Some of the teachers’ strategies to overcome students’ problem in classroom are supported by some theories. First, the repeated interaction between
teachers and students is in line with the suggestion that the uninterrupted lecture is no longer than five minutes for elementary students, and longer than that for older learners (Harmer, 2007). Next, in the effort to make the students speak up, Harmer also suggests allowing students to speak in a controlled way at first where the teacher dictates some parts of sentence which the students have to fill in and the students have to complete it by themselves. In addition, the teacher should not stop responding and giving motivation.

Regarding the use of English as a medium of instruction, Davies and Pearse (2000) state that English should be used in classroom as much as possible to create genuine situation in the use of target language, However, in the school, some students could not understand the instruction. To overcome this problem, it is suggested that the teachers English and Indonesian. Indonesian can be used to explain some instructions because the use of L1 is beneficial for students’ learning engagement (Harmer, 2007). This, however, does not mean that the teachers use grammar translation method.

According to the 2004 Standard of Content, English subject for vocational high school covers four hours in which each hour lasts for 45 minutes. Usually, the lesson is divided into two meetings, yet in the ability grouping in SMKN one meeting lasted for four hours consecutively. If the uninterrupted five-minute-lecture is not good for students’ concentration, the consecutive four-hour lesson is surely more boring and exhausting for the students. That was done to avoid the problem with the schedule of other subjects in the distribution of time allotment and classroom. Consequently, the teachers should be more creative in creating interactive and fun learning process without leaving the content of the lesson to maximize students’ learning.

The Students’ Opinion toward the Implementation of Ability Grouping

The students’ Positive attitude toward English is of paramount importance for their learning success. Smith (2004) in Fachhurrazy (2011) states that the students’ feeling toward the subject is a key to the successful teaching and learning. The result of the questionnaire revealed that most of the students viewed ability grouping positively. The students felt the advantages in the learning result
and socialization as well although some of them did not like English and the implementation of ability grouping. Ability grouping gave them new learning atmosphere. The attention of the teachers in small classes helped them to learn English better. In addition to that, the teachers’ willingness to help them by giving extended time outside the regular lesson time to have a test and remedial tasks provided the students with more time to prepare themselves and that increased students’ trust to the teacher.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusions

Ability grouping in SMKN 1 Singosari is aimed to improve the quality of English teaching and learning activities to equip the students with sufficient English skills to be used in the work field later when they graduate. Ability grouping implementation started with placement test in the form of writing test. Due to some weaknesses of the writing test, the use of multiple-choice test is worth considering overcoming the problem in writing test as long as the teachers follow the guideline to make good multiple-choice test. The score from the placement test was used to group the students into several levels. The language skills were taught separately by different teachers. The course design in ability grouping actually should have been based on the students’ different levels of ability even if the students had to use the same teaching and learning materials. In the classrooms, the teachers’ treatment and the giving of additional material should match the students’ levels of ability. Finally, most students gave positive opinions to the implementation of ability grouping system.

Suggestions

Based on the findings, the teachers are recommended to be stricter in implementing the placement test and give detailed information about remedial test to avoid problems that may occur in the end of the semester. The course design should also be adjusted to the students’ different needs based on their ability levels. The principal and curriculum advisor should also support the implementation of grouping ability by providing sufficient teaching and learning
facilities and conduct evaluation which is needed to create better English teaching and learning. Concerning the students, they should follow the teaching activities and increase their awareness and responsibility to be seriously engaged in the learning, assessment, and remedial process. For future researchers, it is suggested that they do the research on the implementation of ability grouping in other levels of education in Indonesia.

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