CELEBRATING STUDENTS' DIVERSITIES THROUGH UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS' CHARACTERISTICS

Case Study

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Abstract

Dealing with different students' characteristics cannot be avoided by the teacher in everyday teaching. It is well-known that teaching English to young learners is different from teaching an adult. Therefore, teachers are required to understand the characteristics of the students in order to know the students' needs so that learning goals can be achieved effectively. Research under the case study design had been done at a private school in Surakarta which used interview and observation to collect the data from 2 English teachers in that school. This research aims at investigating the teachers' beliefs on understanding characteristics of students and exploring how those beliefs are reflected in the teaching-learning practices. The result shows the two participants believe that understanding the characteristics of students is important for teachers because it can help them to develop their teaching-learning strategy and achieve learning objectives effectively. This research also reveals the way the participants reflect their beliefs in teaching-learning practices.

Keywords: beliefs, students' characteristics, young learners, teaching English

1. Introduction

Teachers are required to master several competencies in the teaching-learning process. Understanding the materials, having the ability to use technology, managing the classroom well, and having a creative strategy in teaching are competencies that commonly discussed. But there is a basic competence that should be mastered by the teacher, namely understanding characteristics of students.

In Indonesia, to become a professional teacher, there are four competencies must be mastered; these are professional competence, pedagogical competence, social competence, and personality competence (Indonesian Law Number 14 of 2005). Understanding students' characteristics is one of the aspects involved in pedagogical competence.

Students differ in many aspects. The most obvious is at the physical differences, such as height, facial characteristics, and tone of voice. However, there are other differences that are apparent, particularly in other students, such as some are quite while others are noisy, some are fluent while others are hesitant of speech, some are socially active while others are reserved, and etc. (Riding & Rayner, 2012). Those differences are faced by the teachers in

teaching-learning process. Therefore, understanding students' characteristics is important to teaching. Knowing and understanding students' characteristics will give benefit for the teachers to plan how to teach students and to find out each student's needs. If teachers are able to understand students' characteristics, they will be able to decide the suitable learning strategy and material for the students so that the goal of learning can be achieved. Moreover, the potentials of students also can be developed because they are given opportunities to learn according to their capacities.

In this research, young learners refer to children who are learning English in elementary school, for whom English is not their first language. Children have shorter attention spans than adults and also more energetic. They learn language according to specific stages of development. Hence, understanding the principles of language acquisition and implement it in the way that keep children motivated to learn is the key to teaching English to children (Hashemi & Azizinezhad, 2011).

However, teaching English as a language which is not used in students' everyday lives can be quite challenging. Teachers are supposed to think creatively so that students will be interested to learn. Following the new era, the world needs generation who is not only good at academic but also non-academic. In this point, the role of teachers is important where they do not only deliver material but also can be a guide for their students in discovering their interests, talents, and potentials. If their potentials are developed well, they might become high-skilled generation who are professional in their field.

To carry out teaching tasks, teachers can be influenced by various factors, one of them is their beliefs. Pajares (1992) stated that belief is a personal guide to help individuals to define and to understand the world and themselves. Belief controls people actions. Several kinds of research have shown the relationship between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices. According to Gilakjani and Sabouri (2017), teachers' belief is increasingly becoming a vital factor in the language teaching-learning process. It will influence teachers' attitude and performance in teaching. It also has a greater impact than teachers' knowledge on planning their lessons, on the types of decision they adopt, and on classroom practice.

This research focuses on teachers' beliefs on understanding characteristics of students. It becomes the focus of the research because some phenomena happened showed the lack of awareness of teachers in understanding characteristics of students so that the teaching-learning activities is only focused on reaching some scores or passing the standard score for English subject. Brazelton and Greenspan (2000) in Linse (2005) state that children require and deserve professional teachers who interact with them in appropriate ways based on the child's social or emotional, physical, cognitive, and moral development.

There is a private school in Surakarta that attracts the researchers because the school shows a different thing that is giving attention to the students' characteristics. In this school, there are many students who are good at English. They even won several English competitions. Because of the unique phenomenon found by the researchers, this research aims at investigating the English teachers' beliefs on understanding students' characteristic in this school and exploring how those beliefs are reflected in the teaching-learning practices. The questions of the research are (1) what are the teachers' beliefs on understanding students' characteristics? and (2) how are the teachers' beliefs on understanding students' characteristics reflected in the teaching-learning practices? The researchers hope that this research will give benefit to other teachers in the field of teaching-learning English so that the awareness of understanding characteristics of students will increase.

2. Methodology

This research is qualitative research which used the case study as a research design. This method was chosen because the researchers found a unique phenomenon at the observed school. This research had been carried out at one of a private school in Surakarta. Two English teachers were selected, all of who have been teaching English from 8-18 years. Both of them graduated from the English department in one of the private university in Surakarta. The teachers' names are pseudonyms that are T1 refers to the first participant and T2 refers to the second participant.

The interviews and observations were carried out by the researchers at the school. Semi-structured interviews were done and digitally recorded and transcribed. The interviews were designed to obtain data from the participants about their beliefs on understanding students' characteristics and how their beliefs are reflected in their teaching-learning practices.

After interviewing the participants, the researchers observed the teaching-learning activities to clarify what the teachers stated in the interview process. Robson (2002) claimed that what people do may differ from what they say they do so that observation provides a reality check.

The data of this study were in the form of information related to teachers' beliefs on understanding characteristics of students. To analyze the data, the researchers used a data analysis technique from Miles and Huberman (1994). Firstly, the researchers reduced the collected data by summarizing it, chose the main data, found the pattern, and lost the unimportant data. Secondly, the researchers showed the data so that the information related to the research's issue could be seen clearly. The last is drawing conclusion. The researchers verified the data and made the initial conclusion to answer the research questions.

3. Findings and Discussion

This section presents findings related to the teachers' beliefs on understanding students' characteristics and how the teachers' beliefs are reflected in the teaching-learning practices.

1.1. Teachers' Beliefs on Understanding Characteristics of Students

The results of the interviews are displayed in this section. The researchers asked about the teachers' beliefs on young learners, characteristics of young learners, and the best age to learn English.

1.1.1. Teachers' beliefs on young learners

Teachers view young learners in a slightly different way. The first participant (T1) states that young learners are students aged 3-13 which study at primary school. The second participant (T2) explains that young learners are children who have studied a foreign language as English started at the age of 7-13. He adds that students from his school have studied English from the first grade.

The main focus of the first participant's belief about young learners is the age of students whereas the second participant 's is students who learn English. Their beliefs of young learners are along similar lines with Scott and Yetrebeg (1995) and Nunan (2001) in the chronological span of young learners that is from the age of 3-15, and then support the theory from Wendy and Lisbeth (1992) in Fajarina (2017) who divide young learners, based on their experience of the acquiring language. The first level is the pupils who do not get more foreign language experience (5-7) and the second level is the pupils who have more foreign language experience (8-10).

1.1.2. Characteristics of young learners

The first participant (T1) feels happy to teach young learners. According to him, young learners make him comfortable even they are labile and sensitive. He loves teaching them because they are cute, cheerful, and true to themselves. He believes that he can learn many things from them. The second participant (T2) points out the characteristics of young learners on their mentality. According to him children tend to be more curious, want to learn everything, and want to know anything. In the context of English learning, he states that children are interested in English and tend to be motivated in learning because English is a foreign language and according to students it is cool if they can acquire English.

Related to the difference between children and adult in learning English, both participants believe that children love to learn in fun ways such as sing a song, do some projects, make something, and like to interact with the others.

1.1.3. The best age to learn English

To get a better understanding of the teachers' beliefs on understanding students' characteristics, the researchers asked the participants about the best age to learn English. The first participant (T1) view that it is important for children to learn English started from kindergarten or primary school because it is the critical age for children to be able to memorize everything.

From the answer, the first participant (T1) believes that learning English from an earlier age is better because in this age children tend to be able to memorize easier.

According to the second participant (T2), learning English started from earlier is also better. He believes that if we give stimulants for children about foreign language, they will be more prepared in learning English.

So, it can be inferred that both participants believe that learning English is better started at a young age. It supports the idea from Pinter (2006) in Pransiska (2016) who points out some reasons for the benefit of learning a foreign language for children.

1.2. The Reflection of Teachers' Beliefs on Understanding Characteristics of Students in Teaching-Learning Practices

The researchers asked and confirmed to the participants about the way they reflect their beliefs in the teaching-learning process. The results are displayed below.

1.2.1. The way English teachers identify the characteristics of students

Both participants were asked about the way they identify the characteristics of their students. The first participant (T1) explains that he knows students' characteristics while he taught his students in the classroom. He also asks other teachers like homeroom teacher about his students. It seems that the first participant (T1) is a teacher who cares about their students because he tries to find out students' characteristics not only from the time he is teaching but also from having discussion with other teachers too.

The second participant (T2) answered the question by explaining the relation between students' characteristics with learning. According to him, characteristics of students can be seen on the seriousness of the students to prepare learning, to take a part in learning, and to do the assignments. He added enthusiastic students usually do their assignments without any reminder. Then, students' characteristics also can be seen from the students' score on daily test. It can be concluded that the second participant (T2) gets the understanding of students' characteristics by observing students in their learning activities. He believes that understanding characteristics of student especially young learners are easier than adults.

1.2.2. The way English teachers ensure that all students get the same opportunities to actively participate in learning activities

The researchers confirmed to the participants about how they ensure that all students get the same opportunities in learning activities. From the interview revealed the importance of giving opportunities to students to actively participate in the class. According to the first participant (T1), teachers should give an opportunity for students to improve their English skill. He facilitates each student to speak in English by doing project and present it. He also gives questions and invites the students to share their opinion about the material given by the teacher. The second participant (T2) also gives each student chances to actively participate in learning activities starting from the beginning of learning by delivering simple questions related to students' daily activities. According to him, it will stimulate the students to talk in English.

1.2.3. The way English teachers arrange the seat

In the way to arrange the seat, the researchers also asked the participants to get a better understanding of their beliefs and its reflection in the class. The first participant (T1) states that to not make students bored, he changes the seating chart every week except for test. According to him, arranging seat can be an alternative way to create a convenience class. If students feel comfortable, they will enjoy the class.

It can be inferred that there is flexibility in arranging the seat and the first participant (T1) is also aware of the importance of preparing the convenience class to the students.

The second participant (T2) explains that arranging a seat is an optional condition. It depends on necessity. If he wants to have a discussion section in his class so he will instruct students to arrange the seat as the need. He further explains that there is no difficulty in arranging seats for his class.

Both participants explain that there is no difficulty in arranging the class. They can communicate with other teachers easily as well. It means there is good teamwork between one to another. Both believe that it is important to make the student feel comfortable in the class so that they try to not make students bored in learning by changing the position of the seat.

1.2.4. The way English teachers handle students with different physical and learning abilities

Students with various characteristics, different physical and learning abilities can be found anytime and everywhere. The participants share their ways to handle this kind of situation. According to the first participant (T1), some students are easy in learning English and some are not. It is a challenge for the teachers to think about how to use suitable teaching strategies. According to him, teachers are supposed to be creative.

Dealing with this situation, the first participant (T1) thinks that it is kind of a challenge to him as a teacher so that it makes him to think and become a creative teacher. He believes that as a teacher he needs to be creative in using teaching strategy.

The second participant (T2) reveals the way he handles this situation. He explains that to handle students who have difficulties in learning English, he will give special treatment and try to be close with them by talking heart to heart and he will teach them slowly to help them to learn English. He also shares his experience that sometimes he finds difficulties when there is not any support from the students' parents. Even he gives special treatment but if there is not any support from the students' parents like reviewing the material at home or accompanying students to learn at home it will be unbeneficial.

1.2.5. The way English teachers pay attention to students with certain physical need or learning abilities

Related to the students with different physical needs or learning abilities, both teachers have certain ways to pay attention to them. The first participant (T1) shares his experience that he has one student who has a different physical condition in his class. But, there is not any problem with it. He motivates his students to respect each other. Furthermore, he explains to his students that everybody is the same. Then, he focuses on the way he teaches in the class that is using many teaching strategies. He makes sure that each student feels comfortable in the class and gives attention to the lesson.

From his explanation, there is not any problem with the students who have different physical need. The teaching-learning process still can run well. Even other students are able to accept their friend's condition. Moreover, he believes that the most important thing is to make sure that students feel comfortable when learning English with him. He adds that giving motivation to those students (with different physical need) will encourage them to learn in the class actively like others.

The second participant (T2) does not have any students with a different physical need so he only focuses on the students with difficult learning abilities. According to him giving additional hours is effective to help students with difficult learning abilities. Furthermore, giving more attention to them, guiding them in learning, and repeating explanation of materials also can be alternative ways in dealing with those students.

1.2.6. The reason of English teachers to find out the cause of students' behavior deviations

In order to get better understanding on students' characteristics, having a good communication with students is necessary. Students may act differently in the class. Getting to know the reason why they do such things is beneficial to do. The first participant (T1) says that it is also a challenge to know why students have difficulties in learning. He tries to motivate them to learn English and also talk to them by heart to heart. He believes that by trying to put himself on students' shoes will help him to understand them.

Dealing with this situation, the second participant (T2) has several ways. Those are persuading students to take a part in the learning, giving more attention to them, giving warning, reporting to the homeroom teacher, and even communicating to the students' parents. It seems that the second participant (T2) also really cares with his students.

1.2.7. The way English teachers develop the students' potentials in English and overcome the shortcomings

Students with different potentials are also found in the class. So, it is important to know how the teachers deal with this case. The first participant (T1) gets information about students' potentials from the activities in the class. He calls it as an observation. He observes students' characteristics and potentials in the class. He believes that students need a community to help them learning English well. So, he provides some programs at school namely English club and English agent. Those programs are available for all students.

The second participant (T2) states that if he finds a smart student, he will promote him/her to be an English agent. It is a program where there is a student who becomes the agent of English subject and he/she has several tasks such as helping friends in learning English, translating the material in the class, and leading the discussion class.

Both participants share the same ways to facilitate students' potentials that is creating community to make students feel easy in learning English by making English club and English agent program at school.

The findings would seem to show how important it is to understand students' characteristics for the teachers. The participants believe that understanding characteristics of students is important because it can help them to develop their teaching-learning strategy. By implementing learning strategy which is suitable with the characteristics of students, they believe that the learning objectives and effective teaching are able to achieve. If the learning objectives are achieved, it means the teaching-learning process succeeds. It is in line with Juhana (2014) who claims that young learners' teachers are necessary to know and understand the characteristics of young learners because it can affect many aspects of teaching such as teaching style, methods, learning materials, lesson plan, and the way of getting along with them so that effective teaching is achieved.

The findings revealed that teachers' beliefs on understanding characteristics of students affect their teaching practices. The participants believe that teaching children need a special requirement that is teacher must be creative and it is not like teaching adult. Their beliefs support Harmer (2007) who states that teaching young learners are different from teaching adult. The participants believe that the more they understand their students the better they can teach them. They add that if they know their students' characteristics well they can help their students when they have a difficult time in learning.

The participants view young learners are students who study English in primary school. According to them, young learners prefer learning in fun way, as a result, they develop their learning strategy into interesting activities such as doing a project, playing games, making a puppet, presenting something, and performing. This is consistent with Hashemi and Azizinezhad (2011) who think that fun activities will help young learners remember language materials presented better. They also believe that students love doing physical movement so they provide some activities which facilitate their need such as having outing class and role-playing. These beliefs correlate fairly well with Brendon (2012) who states that physical movement becomes an essential part of children learning. Both participants stated that young learners tend to have high curiosity in learning. They want to know anything and try everything. This fact is in line with what Harmer stated that young learners generally show their enthusiasm in learning and curious about the world around them (Harmer, 2007).

As far as the participants aware the role of the teachers is not just to deliver the material so that they do care to their students. In some occasions, the participants ask the students about their problems and needs. They give the opportunity to their students to ask and to share their opinion in the class. They help their students to face their difficulties in learning. They even give an additional lesson to the students who need special treatment. In this case, the participants do their role as a professional teacher who guides students in learning. These beliefs fit with Brazelton and Greenspan (2000) in Linse (2005) who state that children require professional teachers who interact with them in appropriate ways based on their social or emotional, physical, cognitive, and moral development.

The teachers' beliefs on understanding characteristics of students are reflected in the teaching practices. Teachers identify the characteristics of their students from the teaching-learning activities. They talk to the students about everything. Sometimes, the participants offer their students the chance to make their own choices when it comes to learning. For example, if the students already know the material and want to learn other things, the participants will facilitate it. Choice can be a powerful motivator because it helps to foster student interest and independence.

The participants also give the opportunity to each student to actively participate in the class such as by facilitating students to speak in English during the learning. For example, in the teaching-learning process, the participants try to make their lesson interactive. They do

not only stand in front of the room and deliver the materials to the students but they make learning to be more interactive by questioning students about the material and also their opinion about something. They believe that if they involve students and make their lessons interactive, their classes become more interesting. Then, the participants also give attention to the students' difficulties and ask their opinion about the material discussed without judging them. They believe that students are more interested in learning when they are a little more relaxed. They try not to take teaching so seriously.

The participants also create a classroom game where all students can join in. They believe that games are a great way to keep lessons interesting. Games make learning fun, and games in class are a prescription for happy children. In choosing the material given, the participants try to create a real-world connection to what their students are learning. According to them, this will give their students a better understanding of why they need to learn what the participants are teaching. The participants believe that it is very helpful to help the students to make a connection between what they are learning in class and how they will use the information in the future. Then, they also communicate with the homeroom teacher and also students' parents about everything that happened to their students.

4. Conclusion

This research has underlined the importance of understanding the characteristics of students for teachers. In the context of teaching English to young learners, the participants believe that teaching young learner is different from teaching an adult. As they stated that their students are heterogeneous. They have different characteristics, needs, capacities, and difficulties in learning.

The evidence from this research points towards the idea that it is important for teachers to know their students as learners. Teachers who know how their students learn can guide them and lead them to grow in their learning. Teachers who also know their students as unique individuals can help them to face their difficulties in learning and embrace their potentials.

The participants' beliefs about understanding characteristics of students are reflected in the practices. To deal with the students who have different characteristics and needs, they do some strategies in learning. Firstly, talk to the students. Talking to students is one of the ways to understand students' characteristics. Having a natural conversation with the students such as about their learning and what interest them outside of the world academics will strengthen the relationship between teachers and students.

Secondly, give an opportunity for students to actively participate in learning such as making the lesson interactive. Thirdly, play with students. Playing with students is also the best way to get to know the students. Students, especially young learners want to have some fun with their teachers. When it comes to teaching, teachers need to have some fun with the students as well. Fourthly, choose materials which are close to the students' life. The last is to communicate with the students' parents so that the students will get supports in learning.

The present findings might enlighten other teachers to give more attention on understanding characteristics of their students and inspire other researchers to explore the challenge teachers faced in understanding their students.

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