

Varying strategies to maximize the effectiveness of ELT: Lessons from training sessions

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ABSTRACT

Several factors determine the effectiveness of language learning, one of which is the variety of strategies carried out by the teacher in the teaching and learning process. Defined as any efforts made to maximize the learning achievements, strategy encompasses material development, classroom management, and teaching techniques. The question is in what ways the teacher implements such a variety, and what the effect is. This study used a descriptive technique in the sense that it described the existing phenomenon as it was without giving any treatment to bring about the data. It was conducted in an in-service teacher training which aimed to improve the trainees' mastery of ELT strategies and the teaching language. The data were collected using questionnaires, observation, documentation, interviews, and reflection. The subjects were the trainers and the teacher trainees who have mixed language abilities and teaching experiences. Having been collected, the data were analyzed by classifying the topically relevant facts, displaying them, scrutinizing their interconnections, and drawing some conclusive points. The findings show a range of varieties was employed during the training process, covering the use of diverse materials, fun classroom activities, learner-centered approach, affect-lowering classroom management, and varied interaction patterns. As effective learning is dependent on the fresh minds, teachers should always strive to prevent their students from exhausting monotony.



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1. Introduction

Despite the advancement of technology and the popularity of distant teaching and learning, teachers still play an essential and strategic role in determining the success of instructional programs including language learning. Weaknesses in the curriculum, meager materials, incomplete facilities can be compensated with the presence of resourceful and skillful teachers. Therefore, their knowledge needs to be always updated and their skills developed. This implies the importance of teacher professional development. What knowledge and which skills are to be trained on the teachers, and how the training makes any difference in the teachers are addressed in this study.

Several studies on teacher professional development (TPD) have taken some focuses, Neghavati (2016) on the importance of online literacy to be given in teacher training program, Van Driel & Berry (2012) on the significance of teachers' understanding of how learners learn (pedagogical content knowledge) to be included in TPD programs, and Girvan et al. (2016) on the need of teacher's understanding of experiential learning. Farrell (2012) said the time gap between graduation and starting to work causes some challenges on teachers either in planning, delivering, or managing the lesson. Hence, they need some transitional training to cope with those problems. Dixon et al. (2014) found that differentiating instruction is positively related to a teacher's efficacy and their belief about efficacy. They recommend that differentiating instruction be one of the subjects of

teacher training. However, they did not explain what aspects of teaching should be differentiated and how to implement it in classroom practice. Due to its significance, they suggested that differentiating the instruction be taken as the focus of future studies.

This present study is, on the one hand, in line with such a recommendation, on the other hand, it filled the niche left out by other researchers. It focused on the various types of materials, differing techniques of presentations, varieties of interaction patterns, and divergent ways of classroom management. Those points have not been dealt with by the aforementioned studies. This study was conducted by exploring the in-service teacher professional development program of which aim was to expand English teachers' knowledge about the variety of teaching strategies and simultaneously improving their ability in using teacher language. Strategy defined as any efforts made by the teacher to maximize the learning achievement encompasses preparing relevant teaching materials, managing a conducive classroom, and conducting effective teaching techniques. Varying the strategies is a logical consequence because in a big class consisting of various learners' characteristics, mixed abilities, and different preferences (Dörnyei, 2014; Skehan, 2014), following a learner-centered approach (Schreurs & Dumbraveanu, 2014), the teacher should vary her/his strategies so that each student feels not only catered individually; thus, increasing their motivation and engagement in learning, but also satisfied and could learn best because the materials and activities are made appropriate with the learners' differences.

According to Merrill (2001), a classroom teaching and learning process is an interaction among interrelated components: knowledge component, strategy component, and instructional transaction component. Knowledge is conveyed by the materials, strategy includes methods and techniques, and instructional transaction refers to interactions among instructional participants, such as teacher and students. A teacher uses techniques to present the materials to be learned by students in a certain learning condition. It is the teacher who decides what kinds of materials, techniques, and learning conditions are most effective for the students to learn. Therefore, the teacher needs to be well-trained to be able to make such a decision. Here lies the importance of teacher professional development (Hughes et al., 2018).

Managing the classrooms is the teacher's effort to prepare a conducive learning condition so that the learning process can take place efficiently and effectively. This should also be done in various ways following the learners' variabilities. They will learn best when the instruction is suitable for their differences. Learning will likely happen when the learners have the feelings of autonomy and responsibility (Najeeb, 2013), no anxiety (Horwitz, 2010), secure, not threatened, low-affective filter (Krashen, 1985). The classroom, therefore, should be managed in such a way to create such a learning condition. Among the differences of the learners are their personality traits (Dörnyei, 2014; Petric, 2019), multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2015), and learning styles.

To cope with such divergent learners' variables, numerous types of materials also need to be prepared, either pedagogical or authentic materials (Tomlinson, 2012), in terms of multimodal materials (Kress, 2010), either verbal (spoken or written), image (still or moving), or music. With these various materials, as many students as possible may get an advantage. Due to learners' differences, the teacher can also conduct different activities to accommodate those learners' variabilities, such as classical, group, pair, or individual works (Spratt et al., 2005). The main consideration is how to make the students actively involved in the activities. Active engagement in the learning process is effective for learning to happen.

2. Research Method

This study used a qualitative approach because it was based on verbal data. It applied a descriptive technique in the sense that it merely described the existing phenomenon as it was without giving any treatment to produce the required data. The site was the teaching and learning process in the teacher training sessions in Sidoarjo, Gresik, and Malang regencies. The training in each site lasted in three successive days, done consecutively with two-week intervals. The subjects were three trainers who have been trained as master trainers for the training of junior secondary school English teachers, who have obtained an In-service Certificate in English Language Teaching (ICELT) certificate from Cambridge University, and a total of 60 trainees (20 teacher trainees in each place). They were teachers of English at Islamic Junior Secondary Schools (MTs) and have mixed language abilities and heterogeneous ages and teaching experiences. The training was designed as a teacher professional development that aimed to improve English teachers' knowledge about the variety of teaching strategies and simultaneously improving their ability in using teacher

language. As the data were obtained from a teacher training program, it was expected that the experiences that the trainees got during the training would be implemented when they return to their schools. Hence, the trainers were always aware of the contents, the activities, and the procedures. The trainers were supposed to become models that were imitated by the trainees.

The data were collected through questionnaires, observations, documentation, interviews, and reflections. The first questionnaire used to get information about the teachers' needs was responded to before the training. Its results were taken as a basis to design the training contents. Observations were done by the researchers while training (participant observation) and sitting in the training room writing field notes when one of the trainers was teaching (non-participant observation). It was done to record the teaching procedures, interaction, activities, and classroom management. The documentation study was to see the materials and media used by the trainers during the sessions. Interviews were done to the trainers to gain information about the reasons and purposes regarding their teaching performance and to the trainees about their attitude towards and perception of the sessions. The second questionnaire to get input about the trainees' evaluation of the training was filled up by the end of the training. Reflections were made by the researchers based on the feeling and experience as supplementary to the existing data.

The data were analyzed following Miles, Huberman and Saldana's (2020) qualitative analysis techniques consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction means that there were processes of selecting, organizing, and simplifying. The observations notes describing the detailed teaching steps and activities, for example, were selected and organized to gain relevant and orderly points. The results of documentation and interviews were simplified to get clear ideas. The data were displayed to facilitate concluding, by explaining the relationship, such as that between the activities and their purposes, and tendencies of the trainers' being always friendly and warm with the trainees. In that way, it is easier to make inferences and interpretation. Finally, some conclusive points were made, discussed, and interpreted within the framework of teacher professional development purposes.

3. Findings and Discussion

The findings are related to pre-training input about teachers' needs, whilst-training process covering contents and procedures, and post-training evaluation including the impact on the trainees. The training contents were focused on ELT strategies included how to develop materials, how to manage the classroom to establish a conducive learning condition, and how to vary the activities to prevent students from boredom. It was based on the humanistic teaching principle, i.e. the teaching and learning process was underlain by a learner-centered approach of which consequence is that the teacher accommodates the learners' differences.

3.1. Trainees' Profile and Needs

The trainees were teachers of English at Islamic Junior Secondary Schools (MTs) in the districts of Sidoarjo, Gresik, and Malang. The total number of participants was 60 teachers. The recruitment was done by the local teacher's associations, so it was considered representative of all Islamic school English teachers in the districts. The results of needs analysis questionnaire showed that the genders were proportionally distributed with varying ages between 44 – 31 years old with the average age of about 40 years. Most of them were teaching at public schools, only a few were at private ones. Their educational backgrounds were relatively varied. Ninety percent were graduates of English Education Departments, the rest from the non-English departments. Their teaching experience also varied, ranging from 20 to 6 years. They are all working as full teachers and have no extra job. Viewing their teaching load, 60% teaching for more than 30 hours per week, the rest is around 20 hours per week. What they liked in being teachers is that they love meeting and interacting with students. What they did not like was related to administrative tasks, such as correcting test results, making academic reports, and writing lesson plans.

The data showed that the difficulties they faced in the teaching and learning process was how to manage the class, conduct communicative activities, face the students who have low learning motivation, use varied strategies, and how to motivate students to learn English. Some of them faced the difficulty of implementing the curriculum contents, developing fun and varied teaching techniques and media, and evaluating learning achievements. Considering those divergent backgrounds of the trainees, the training that aimed to cope with some of those problems was

designed and conducted to satisfy those empirically existing needs on the one hand, and to comply with some theoretical language teaching requirements on the other, such as teacher language (Walsh, 2002).

3.2. Varying Teaching Materials

Regarding the teaching materials, trainees were introduced to and trained on how to select, adapt, and develop a range of materials. The findings showed that one of the training materials was about the kinds of language teaching materials, how to select and how to adapt them. The teacher trainees were taught, first, how to select the authentic materials which is dictated by their suitability for the teaching and learning objectives. Second, they were also trained on how to adapt the authentic materials to make them relevant to the learners' life. In using the train schedule, for example, the teacher may modify the names of the cities of departure and destination so that they are familiar to the learners, thus, becoming more meaningful. In using e-mails as the teaching materials, the teacher can modify the names that exist in the mails, for instance, by using the names of the students in the class. In that way, the e-mail becomes more contextual. In short, adaptation needs to be done to make the authentic materials more relevant to the learners.

First, using the materials needs to consider variety and relevance. To cope with learners' divergent characteristics, materials should be developed in such a way that they become effective for each learner's learning. To accommodate students with visual learning style, for example, the materials were in forms of written texts, graphics, pictures, figures, tables, maps, or any other materials which can be perceived by the learners using their visual senses. For auditory learners, the materials are spoken texts either in the forms of oral announcements, speeches, stories delivered orally, TV news, conversations, lectures, airplane pre-flight instructions, classroom presentations, videos, audio-recordings, talk shows, or any others. In sum, materials should be so varied to accommodate learners' differences.

There are two kinds of language teaching materials: pedagogical and authentic (Tomlinson, 2012). Pedagogical materials are the materials which are developed intended to be used for teaching and learning purposes, such as students' handbooks, students' working booklets, school textbooks, etc. These materials are rigorously developed and strictly graded in their level of difficulty according to the grades of the learners. The topics are carefully selected and the educational values are integrated to make them appropriate to achieve certain target competences. The basic consideration is how to develop the materials relevant to the predetermined learning objectives.

Authentic materials are those taken from the real-life communication which is not intended for teaching and learning purposes, such as taken from newspapers, magazines, television broadcasts, in the forms of advertisements, news, editorials, pictures, etc. There are things to consider in using authentic materials, such as whether they are suitable with the teaching objectives, and whether they are relevant with the learners' characteristics, level of their language competence, their cognitive capacity, and their age and experiences. Since the materials are not intended for teaching and learning purposes, to use them in the classroom, teachers need to select them and adapt them to make them appropriate for the learning goals and relevant for the students.

Some examples of authentic materials that can be used in ELT classrooms are newspapers, advertisements, wrappings, train schedules, song lyrics, announcements, diaries, restaurant menus, e-mails, manuals, job contracts, maps, identity cards, driving license, etc. Any of those texts are adaptable and usable as the teaching materials depending on the topic of the lesson. Therefore, to use any of them in the language lessons, the teacher should think of adapting the materials or selecting the tasks which are appropriate for the students.

3.3. Varying Ways of Managing Classroom

The findings show that the teacher trainers implemented some strategies to make the learning condition conducive for learning. They tried to create a good rapport with the trainees by showing solidarity and a close or intimate relationship with the trainees. The trainers smiled a lot, called the trainees by names, asked some personal questions to some trainees. One of the trainers did not seem to be pushy, authoritarian. In instructing to do an activity, she used a more inclusive invitation than an exclusive order. For example, the trainer said, "OK. Now let's look at number 9" (pointing to question number 9 on the worksheet) rather than saying, "OK. Look at number 9." The former

indicated involvement of the speaker implying a closer relationship between trainer and trainees and not superior-subordinate commands.

The findings also demonstrated that the trainers gave greater autonomy and responsibility to the trainees and suggested that they also do the same to their students. The teachers should trust their students by giving them freedom in the learning process. For illustration, in conducting a group discussion activity, students are let to choose their members to create a group. In giving a reading task, students are instructed to go to the library and given the freedom to choose what to read. Then, they are assigned to write a report of what they have read. To maintain a good relationship between the teacher and students, trainees are also advised not to be angry with the students when they cannot or do not make their homework. What the teacher needs to do is not to be angry but to ask them personal reasons, why they do not do the assignments, and ask if they can comply with the tasks. When the students seem to get difficulty complying with the work, they can be given the freedom to choose to compensate for it. In that way, students feel secure, not threatened, and not intimidated; hence, preserving a good feeling with the teacher.

The harmonious social relationship between teachers and students will prevent students from feeling of anxiety when they meet and interact in the classroom. That was exemplified by the trainers' smiley behavior, who always tried to retain unthreatening, and did not keep distant from the trainees. The trainers always interacted closely and intensively with the trainees although they were relatively having a distant relationship. That was evidenced by the fact that they had not known each other before the training. The trainers were senior lecturers at a state university and the trainees were junior secondary school teachers, the trainers and trainees had never met before and had never communicated either. Still, they interacted as if they had known each other before, even since the first meeting. That was because the trainees put their name tags on the table in front of them, and the trainer stuck it on her dress. Also, the first meeting was commenced with a personal introduction. Therefore, the trainer and trainees knew and called each other by name.

Managing a classroom is an effort made by the teacher to create a learning condition that is conducive for learning. There were ways conducted by the teachers to establish a good learning condition, related to physical and psychological conditions. The classroom is physically conducive for learning, for example, when it is clean, tidy, not noisy, and cool. In such a condition, students will feel convenient to stay and to learn because they are not bothered by any external disturbances, hence, they can concentrate on learning. What is more important is the psychological condition that exists in the classroom. The condition is favorable for learning when there is a good social relationship among the people in the classroom, for instance, between teacher and students, and among students. The condition is also effective when students feel to have autonomy and responsibility. The learning condition is also supportive when students feel secure and safe, and do not feel anxious, or threatened. This goes in line with the principles of Suggestopedia (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Richards and Rodgers, 1986) which claims that there was a positive connection between learners' knowledge change and their non-anxious condition (Warr & Downing, 2000).

3.4. Varying Activities

The training was held in three successive days, lasting for six hours each day, starting from 08.00 a.m. and ended at 03.00 p.m. The break time was one hour, 12.00-13.00. This background is important to imagine the density of the program and the workload. If only had the activities not been varied and fun, the trainees who were adult learners might have been bored and dropped out. The trainees' comments in the final training evaluation showed that they enjoyed the sessions and felt satisfied with the program.

The findings show that the trainers carried out an array of activities not only to prevent the trainees from boredom but also to give a model of how to conduct it in their teaching. A range of activities were done, such as working in groups matching words, board race, guessing the words, mingling interviews, role plays, jigsaw reading, etc. When the topic was about discussing the variety of teacher and student roles, for instance, trainees were asked to match which activities match one another. For example, when the teacher has the role of informer, the students are listeners and note-takers, when the teacher is monitoring, the students are doing tasks, when the teacher acts as a consultant, the students as clients.

A range of interaction patterns were also practiced, such as classical work, group work, pair work, individual work, and mingling activities (Harmer, 2007). An example of mingling activity

was that the trainees were divided into two groups, each of one group had words, the other had the corresponding definitions. They mingled to find out their partners of words and their definitions. After that, each of the pairs told the class about their findings and got feedback from the other trainees as well as the trainer. The benefits of such an activity were that besides collaborating to understand the concepts, the trainees were actively engaged in an inquiry learning, and practiced using the target language. Also, all trainees with visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and social learning styles would get advantages because such an activity stimulates all senses. More importantly, the trainer did not need to give a too lengthy and boring explanation.

The findings also showed that the trainers most of the time used English as a medium of instruction. That was beneficial for the trainees in some ways. First, the trainees became accustomed to listening to the target language speech, thus improving their listening ability. Second, since the interaction, questions, and answers, were done in English, the trainees also got a lot of chances to communicate using English, hence increasing their communicative skills. Third, as the trainees were of mixed language abilities, the trainers needed to accommodate their talks so that everyone can understand. While doing it, the trainers also tried to raise the trainees' awareness of the type of language they were using, i.e. modified and simplified exerting all possible strategies to make the talk comprehensible, such as using gestures, realia, mimics, and other instructional media. Besides, the trainers also encouraged and reminded them of the importance of maximum use of the target language when teaching the students, even from the initial stage of their learning. In that way, the trainees found a model to imitate and were enthused to practice it in their schools. Fourth, because English was always used throughout the sessions during the training, the trainees got an abundant amount of understandable linguistic input to promote their language acquisition (Krashen, 1985). Thus, the trainees could also improve their language skills. In sum, the training impacts expected on the trainees were not only the improvement of cognitive knowledge and understanding, but also the development of awareness, as well as the enhancement of their language competence.

By the end of the training, trainees were asked to fill up a questionnaire about their perception of the training focusing on the training management, content relevance, training strategy, the trainers' competence, and the training impacts on the trainees. Most responses implied that the training had a good quality. Only a few gave medium scores, and nobody viewed negatively. When asked about what needs to be maintained if conducting the same training again, the participants' responses indicated the existence of varied games, relevance to the needs of teachers and students, various ways of delivering materials, and suitable methods used by the trainers although the participants are mostly senior. Regarding what still needs to be improved among others are teaching practice using electronic media, making online tests, and making scientific writing. The general comment from the trainees showed that the training was useful, interesting, and fun.

The findings showed the variability of the trainees' profiles, experiences, and needs. That the trainees have different ages, abilities, lengths of teaching experiences, and teaching loads entailing their divergent needs necessitate the diversification in their instruction. That was aimed not only to respond to their various needs effectively but also to cope with the problem of boredom that the trainees might have suffered due to the long and exhausting proceeding of the training sessions. Since the learners (trainee teachers) have different concentration-span capacities, various motivations and needs, instruction will be effective when it is done diversely in accordance with those differences. This goes in line with Dornyei (2014) and Skehan (2014) who assert that varying the strategies is a logical consequence in a class which consists of various learners' characteristics, mixed abilities, and different preferences.

Besides those objective realities, another determinant factor confirming the importance of varying the instruction is the currently developing trend towards the implementation of humanistic instruction, viz. the realization of a learner-centered approach. The learner-centered teaching requires that each of the individual participants in the classroom be addressed and catered so that they feel satisfied; hence, increasingly motivated to learn. This high motivation, in a later stage, will promote success in the learning efforts. This is consistent with Masgoret & Gardner (2003) who claim that there is a correlation between motivation and achievement.

While the importance of variety is confirmed in the instructional purposes, the findings also demonstrated the teaching aspects which are to be varied, namely the materials, the ways of classroom management, and the activities. These facets as the research results seem to fill the gap left away by the previous studies conducted by Neghavati (2016), Van Driel & Berry (2012), Girvan et al. (2016), and Farrell (2012). This study also successfully responded to Dixon et al. (2014) who

recommended that diversifying the instruction be focused in the future studies. Therefore, in designing teacher professional development, the ways of differentiating those components for instructional purposes need to be taken into consideration as the contents not only of the teacher training, lesson planning, mentoring, and school supervising, but also of the curriculum of teacher education.

The findings presented above have several implications on ELT. The humanistic teaching and learning requires the implementation of learner-centered approach (Jingna, 2012). Learners have differences and each of the learners needs to be paid attention and satisfied. Teaching cannot ignore individual student's strengths and weaknesses, motivation and preferences, talents, and potentials. Each of the students' needs to feel satisfied, and their needs catered. The implication is that teachers are demanded to pay greater attention to the learners' variabilities. The corollary is that the teaching should be differentiated to accommodate such a variability (Dixon et al., 2014) and the teacher's competence ought to be up-dated and up-graded in line with the advancement of the required skills.

Consistent with the above findings, the teaching aspects that must be differentiated encompass all classroom components, such as contents, strategies, and instructional transaction (Merrill, 2001). The demands of the teachers are not only coming from student personality factors but also from the advancement of external factors, like the current development of information technology. To be successful in the future, students need to acquire four competencies, called 4Cs of the 21st Century skills, namely Creativity, Critical thinking, Collaboration, and Communication (D'Addario, 2020). Creativity is described as the capacity to have a solution over the problems. Critical thinking is indicated by the ability to think critically, by identifying and describing the problem, analyzing the information, formulating solutions, and taking action. Collaboration is the ability to work in teams, learn from, and contribute to the learning of others, use social networking skills, and work empathically with others. Communication refers to the ability to communicate effectively, spoken and written, receptively and productively (D'Addario, 2020).

Furthermore, the revitalization of character education permeating all national education programs, such as the case in Indonesia, has given greater responsibility on the shoulders of the teachers. It is intended to emphasize the inculcation of moral values on the students, in line with the development of their cognitive intelligence (Silvia, 2015). The character education, according to Lickona (1997), is making students accustomed to being virtuous. Its realization in everyday life is manifested in terms of honesty, responsibility, kindness, and courtesy. These might bring about effects on the teacher development programs, especially in connection with the training contents and techniques. The significance of this study with those teachers' tasks lies in the ability to use diverse strategies. When the teacher is aware of and able to implement this principle of varying the strategies, any contents can be delivered using such tactics. A teacher training program is a way to improve such a capability.

4. Conclusion

Consistent with the aims of this study, describing the ways the trainers implemented a variety in the teaching process, this study revealed the trainers' use of diverse materials, fun classroom activities, learner-centered approach, affect-lowering classroom management, and varied interaction patterns. In relevance to the second aim of whether such a variety was effective, it found out the positive effects on the trainees as evidenced by their positive comments and most of their responses which implied that the training had a good quality and impacts on the improvement of their knowledge and experiences. Despite the fact, this study is acknowledged to have limitations. The training effects were viewed based on the questionnaires of which the truth of the responses was based on assumptions. It was also gained through subjective reflections of the trainees and limited only to the time when they had just finished having the training. It is suggested that further research be conducted to reveal the longer-term impacts to see whether the trainees implement the knowledge and experiences as the training results in their actual teaching at schools. So, teacher training for professional development is seen as a trigger to improve the teacher's quality which in a later step affects the improvement of the quality of the learners.

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