OPINION GAP: A STRATEGY IN IMPROVING STUDENTS' SPEAKING ABILITIES

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Abstract: The aims of this study were to find out how Opinion Gap Strategy can improve students speaking abilities and to know students' responses on the implementation of Opinion Gap Strategy in speaking class. The study employed Classroom Action Research consisting of four steps, namely: planning, action, evaluation, and reflection. The instruments used to collect the data were tests, observations, and questionnaire. This study was conducted at class X_4 of SMA Negeri 6 Ambon in 2016/2017 Academic Year at which the students were identified as having problem in speaking abilities. Based on the result of study, the implementation of Opinion Gap Strategy could help and motivate students to express their opinions, ideas, and feelings ona given topics. Furthermore, this strategy also provided positive effects since the students' responses on the questionnaire sheets showed students' agreement on the implementation of the strategy to improve their speaking abilities.

Keywords: Opinion Gap Strategy, speaking abilities, Classroom Action Research

INTRODUCTION

Most students of class X_4 SMA Negeri 6 Ambon were difficult to retell the story orally in English. They retold the story by memorizing all words based on textbooks. They tried to memorize the difficult words that they never learnt before. This strategy caused the students lacking confidence in delivering the stories. Another bad impact is most of students often hesitated to speak in front of their friends because they were afraid of making mistakes when pronouncing the words. Therefore, they felt bored to join speaking activities and lost motivations to continue the lesson as well. On the other hand, Saeed (2013) reveals that students' proficiency in English as foreign language and their willingness and motivation for participation in classroom activities were significant in the communicative competence.

Derakhshan, Khalili & Beheshti (2016) states that a lot of attention has been paid to speaking skill; however, there are some problems in communicative competences and oral task's goals. Moreover, before the story telling presentation, the teacher ought to give opportunities to the students to explore their communicative capacities by practicing the story based on their own understandings so they can paraphrase the words that are presented in the story texts. This statement is also supported by Aliakbari & Mohsennejad (2014) who says that the students must have enough time to prepare for retelling the story so they can find the words and change the structure of sentences into a simpler form to be able to retell them.

Furthermore, the stories in the textbooks cannot assure that the students can memorize all materials although the stories are short and they know about it which means that the teacher should let students express themselves about something that they want to share orally.

Based on the explanation above, the researcher concludes that the best way in teaching speaking is not only to

attract students attention to join in meaningful communication activities but also to create a comfortable system of learning where in this case is not supported very well by the teacher.

Often, The strategy used by the English teacher does not persuade and motivate students in exploring their creative thinking in speaking activities. This occurs because the teacher does not prepare for teaching speaking activity in the classroom well with an attractive strategy. The teacher just orders the students to learn and memorize the stories based on the textbooks without telling them how to organize the stories to become easier to explain by using their own sentences. For many years, students repeat the activities and memorize the dialogs. However, today, they should learn how to express themselves (Al-Noori & Krebt 2015).

With this in mind, there was a need to overcome these problems by using Opinion Gap as a strategy in improving students speaking abilities at Class X^4 of SMA Negeri 6 Ambon. To this end, the research questions of this research were formulated as follows (1) Can Opinion Gap Strategy improve students' speaking abilities at Class X^4 of SMA Negeri 6 Ambon?; (2) What are the students' responses on the implementation of Opinion Gap Strategy?

LITERARY REVIEW
Speaking Abilities

Speaking refers to the abilities to express ideas or feeling orally and then the foreign language students who want to learn English, need to know how to speak using its language. However, nowadays most of students are difficult to communicate in English because this abilities requires social interaction not only inside but also outside of the classroom.

As pointed out by Pathan, Khaiyali & Marayi (2016) that teaching English as a foreign language at schools is not

an easy task and various factors contribute to the difficulties faced while imparting effective foreign language education. Therefore, to help students become easy to speak and more interested in learning and speaking English, the teacher must give opportunities to the students to respond to a given topic and provide the time for students to practice.

This is in line with the statement of Ghiabi (2014) that the communicative output activities arranged by a teacher can give students opportunities to practice language use more freely. On the other hand, if students do not learn how to speak or do not get any opportunity to communicate in the language classroom and perhaps they are not motivated and lose interests in the learning process.

Opinion Gap Strategy for Promoting Speaking Abilities

One of the specific strategies to promote speaking abilities and to develop oral communication skills is the Opinion Gap. The term of 'gap' is derived differently from the communication space in the language teaching area.

Prabhu (1988) introduces Opinion Gap Strategy based on the Bangalore Project, in which the cognitive activities of English teaching on the oral task were applied. He states that since the students get engaged in Opinion Gap activity, their personal traits may influence the learning outcome significantly because this activities require the learners to rely on their personal imagination and way of thinking and then their learning outcome is supposed to be affected by personality factors either positively or negatively.

In other words, the students' feelings and ideas are the focal point of communication in this activity. By applying the principle of Opinion Gap, the teacher can change the students'

activity into more challenging communicative situations.

In order to make students learn how to express idea, feelings to each other, by answering a questionnaire or asking and answering questions based on the implementation of Opinion Gap strategy, the researcher followed several procedure adapted from Keegan (2009), such as: (1) choosing interesting and relevant topic for the students to talk about; (2) creating guiding questions which consist of card game or questionnaire checklist that is usually based on specific topic, such as music and movies; (3) In questionnaire checklist, the students simply have to answer the questions, giving their thoughts and opinions while in guiding questions card game; each group of students then takes turns to ask and answer each other the questions.

Another important thing in the process of Opinion Gap Implementation is that the instructors should let students try to express themselves based on the given topic. There are no rights or wrong answers in this activity, only opinions, and the aim is to provide a lot of speaking practice for the students.

and control group (traditional tasks). The findings revealed that, opinion gap tasks provide a wider range of language output for the students because the students in the experimental group out-performed those in the control group because opinion gap in task-based teaching was more effective in promoting the students speaking abilities than traditional teaching.

Next is a study about the impacts of opinion gap tasks on the speaking of Iranian intermediate EFL learners conducted by Marzban & Hashemi (2013). The study was aimed to investigate the effects of opinion gap task on the speaking abilities of 64 male and female students form 90 Iranian intermediate EFL learners by applying a proficiency test in oral interview for the pretest and posttest. The participants in the experimental group received the opinion gap task while in control group received the conventional task. The result reportes that opinion gap task enhanced Iranian intermediate EFL learners speaking abilities because they were more motivated and interested in speaking activities than the other group.

Table 1: The Indicators of Success

No	Level	Range
1	Exceeds Expectations	93,5% - 100%
2	Meets Expectations	84% - 93%
3	Almost Meets Expectations	74%- 83%
4	Does Not Meets expectations	54% - 73%

Previous Studies

Some previous studies are also relevant to the current research. The first one is a study by Aliakbari & Mohsennejad (2014) entitled *The Effect of Story Retelling Opinion Gap Task on Iranian EFL Students' Speaking Skill.* In this research, 29 students from a private language institute in Khorram Abad, Iran were addressed and divided into two homogeneous group such: experimental (used opinion gap tasks)

RESEARCH METHOD

The place of the research was SMA Negeri 6 Ambon, Maluku. The research subject was 36 students of class X^4 who were identified as having problem in speaking skills.

This research applied Classroom Action Research (CAR) method which consists of (1) planning, (2) implementing, (3) observing, and (4) making analysis and reflection. This

procedure was adopted from Kemmis and Taggart.

The success of this study was achieved when the students could improve their speaking abilities and they reach the *Almost Meets Expectations* to *Exceeds Expectations* level with th score range between 74%-100% as seen in *Table 1*.

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected through three different instruments. The qualitative data were taken through observation checklist and

to give opinions based on the media (questionnaire checklist).

In the second meeting, the researcher grouped the students into six groups to which three pieces of cards containing three questions (guiding questions card game) were distributed to each group. The students were then asked to discuss about the answers to the questions card based on their own opinions before taking turns to ask and answer each other about the questions. In the last meeting of the first cycle, the

Table 2: Scores of Performance Test

Aspect	Score Range							
Task Completion	½	1	1½	2	2½	3	3½	4
Comprehensibility	½	1	1½	2	2½	3	3½	4
Fluency	½	1	1½	2	2½	3	3½	4
Pronunciation	½	1	1½	2	2½	3	3½	4
Vocabulary	½	1	1½	2	2½	3	3½	4
Language Control	½	1	1½	2	2½	3	3½	4

explained in words while quantitative data were collected through tests and questionnaires. The tests were measured by using oral proficiency rating from PALS (Performance Assessment for Language Students)—a holistic rubric adapted from Schools (2013)—and by evaluating speaking aspects such as task completion, comprehensibility, fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, and language control which wrere determined by using converted percentage scores as seen in *Table 2*.

RESEARCH RESULT
First Cycle

The first cycle was conducted on 29th October and 1th and 5th of November 2016. In the first meeting of the first cycle, the researcher explained to the students about the Opinion Gap Strategy, its main point, and the purpose of the strategy. He aslso assigned roles to the students in pairs

researcher conducted a speaking test. The result can be seen in *Graphic 1*.

Reflection

Having implemented the strategy, the researcher revealed that there should be another cycle conducted to acquire accurate and find the answer to the research questions. It is clear from the data presented in the previous section that the students speaking test results had not met the criteria of the success.

Some students did not do well in task completion. As a consequence, they mostly produced many errors in pronunciation. Inversely, they could manage their comprehensibility even though their chosen words (vocabulary) are mostly incorrect. In addition, their speeches were mostly disrupted by hestitation with significant pauses as they searched for words to complete their thoughts. So, this influenced their abilities to restrain the basic language structures.

Below is the brief explanation of each element result from the test of the first cycle based on the PALS rubrics.

Task Completion

In this element, the researcher found that 18 students (50%) got score 1. This means that students had minimum completion of the task and/or their responses were frequently inappropriate. These students had

might be understood by a sympathetic listener.

Vocabulary

In terms of vocabulary element, 16 students (44%) scored 2 stating that these students used minimum variety of vocabulary. There were some repetitions of words and expression, some vocabulary are used inappropriately.
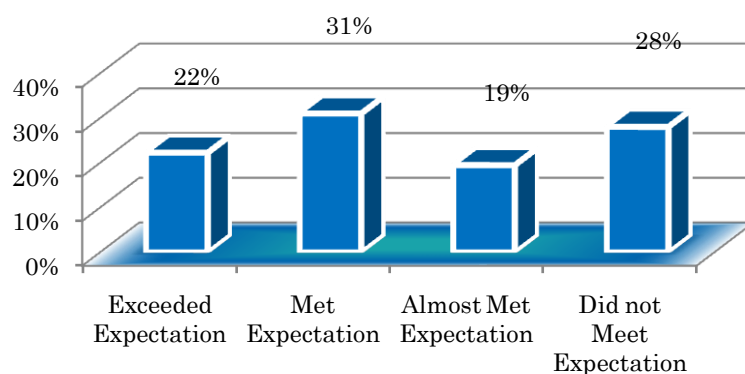
■ **Cycle 1**

Graphic 1: Percentage of Students Scores in First Cycle

made efforts but they failed very short. Possibly missing some required elements of the message.

Comprehensibility

In this part, the researcher found that 10 students (28%) scored 2 which means that the students' responses were mostly incomprehensible whereas 14 students (39%) scored 3. This reveals that their responses were comprehensible, requiring minimum interpretation on the part of the listener.

Fluency

Regarding the fluency element, 10 students (28%) scored 4, counting that the students spoke continuously with few pauses and stumbling.

Pronunciation

In terms of students' pronunciation achievement, there were 15 students (41%) scored 2, which implies that these students speeches were still strongly influenced by their first language and

Language control

In relation to the language control element, 13 students (36%) scored 4 meaning that the basic language structures were used correctly most of the time.

Based on the details of students' performance related to the element result of the students presentation, the researcher found that 10 students (28%) did not meet the expectation level. The researcher inferred that most of the student got problems in task completion and it could influence the other elements. For example, the students just said that they liked a song by giving their own reason which was very short: "I listen to that song because I just like it. *The lyric is good and the singer voice is cool*". This means that the students had minimal completion of the task and/or their responses were frequently inappropriate and possibly missing some required elements of the message.

Based on the problems analyzed in the previous paragraphs, the researcher and the teacher reviewed the action in order to overcome the problems in the first cycle and to deal with it.

First, to make students more comprehensible to complete their thoughts, the researcher and the English teacher selected the topics which were more familiar and interesting to the students to talk

Strategy was done based on some revisions that had been explained in the previous section.

In the second cycle, the result of test showed a progress which could be stated that 100% of the students achieved the indicators of success. The students' score were in the range of 17-24 or ranging from the level of Met Expectation to Exceed Expectations. It can be seen in *Graphic 2*.
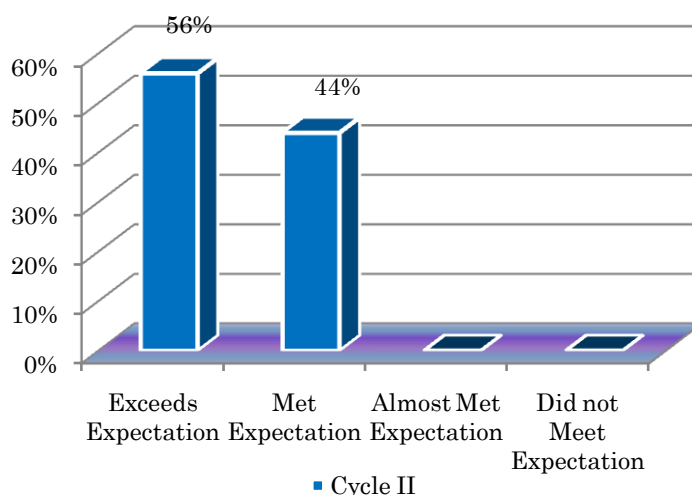
Graphic 2: Percentage of Students' Scores in Second Cycle

about.

Second, to brainstorm unfamiliar words related to the topic to ensure students to have enough words to express their own opiniosn, ideas, and feelings.

Third, to give the students practice time to pronounce the words and to shape good sentences by spreading out their own thoughts which then automatically built up their accuracies and varieties of basic language structures.

From these explanation, it can be concluded that the students' speaking abilities had not improved yet, indicating that there should be a second cycle.

Second Cycle

The second cycle is conducted on 15th, 19th and 22th of November 2016. The implementation of the Opinion Gap

Reflection

Having implemented some revisions in the second cycle, the researcher revealed that at this cycle the students had improved their abilities and the answers for the research questions had been found out as well.

It is clear from the data presented in the previous sections that the students' speaking test result met the criteria of success. The students did well on the task completion without producing too many errors in pronunciation.

In addition, they could manage their comprehensibility by requiring no interpretation of correct words (vocabulary) as well as speaking naturally most of the time. As a consequence, this influenced their language control by restraining the basic language structure.

The brief description of each element of the test result in the second cycle based on the PALS rubrics can be explained below.

Task Completion
In this element, the researcher found that 29 students (81%) scored 4. This indicated that these students' responses to the task presented included a variety of vocabulary and language structures and were usually well organized and cohesive.

Comprehensibility
At this part, the researcher found that 25 students (69%) scored 4 which figured out that the students responses were readily comprehensible, requiring no interpretation on the part of the listener.

Language control
In terms of language control, 23 students (64%) scored 4 which means that the basic language structures were used correctly most of the time, not all of the time.

Based on the explanations above the students had made good improvements in second cycle. They already reached the indicators of success in the presentation test. It can be seen from their scores which were in the range between 17 and 24. Students could learn from the process of learning by setting themselves presentation goals and they were motivated to develop their speaking abilities to become better.

Questionnaire Result
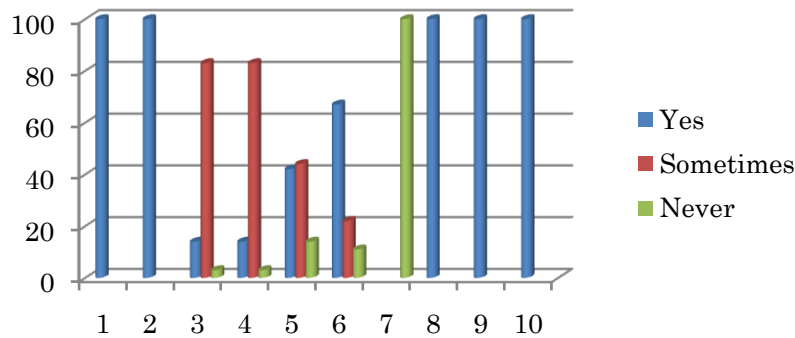
Graphic 3: The Result of Questionnaire

Fluency
In terms of fluency in speaking, 17 students (47%) scored 4. It is a significant change that the students spoke continuously with few pauses and stumbling.

Pronunciation
Regarding to the pronunciation part, there were 13 students (36%) scored 4 which indicates that students' speeches were less influenced by their first language.

Vocabulary
In vocabulary element, 13 students (36%) scored 4, showing that they accurately used a rich variety of vocabulary, expressions, and responses including a large quantity of vocabulary.

To know the students' opinion toward the use Opinion Gap Strategy, the researcher distributed questionnaires whose result showed that most of the students expressed positive responses towards the strategy implementation. The questionnaire consists of 10 questions and was distributed to 36 students.

As seen in *Graphic 3* the analysis of the questionnaire for each questions is derived from the percentage of question items such as: *Yes*, *Sometimes* and *Never* (questions number 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10) while for questions number 2 is focused on skill items that students liked such as *Structure*, *Speaking*, *Reading* and *Listening*.

From the graphic of the questionnaire result, almost all of the

students could participate actively and cooperatively, paid attention, and understood well when the researcher applied the strategy. In other words, students had positive responses towards the implementation of Opinion Gap Strategy.

Observation Checklist Result

In this study, the researcher also applied observation checklist as one of data collection instruments. During the first and second cycle, especially in the process of teaching and learning, the researcher acted as the teacher. Here, the observation checklist was filled out by an English teacher who acted as the observer from SMA Negeri 11 Ambon.

At the first cycle, in pre activity, the researcher made brainstorming related to the topic (music) by asking few simple questions such as: What is your opinion about music? What kind of Music do you like? Why do you like listening to music?

Through these questions, the observer stated that most of reseacher questions were available to come up students' background knowledge about the given topic. The reason behind it because the studens were familiar with the topic, could identify and answer the particular questions. Even though they were more likely lack of confidence in delivering their own ideas or opinions and still worked individually in delivering their ideas.

At the second cycle, in pre activity, the researcher made some evaluation to check students understanding of the previous lessons and also made brainstorming related to the new interesting topic (movie) by asking few simple questions.

Through this moment, the observer pointed out that the teacher had good intention to flashback students' deep understanding about previous materials and continued the learning process by creating new questions for the students.

Most of students more actively worked together as a team, seriously gave their own ideas, as well as joyfully and confidently spoke about the given topic. In other words, there were some improvements on students speaking activities on this stage.

DISCUSSIONS

The success of the students in developing their speaking abilities occured when students were able to deliver ideas in their minds based on the given topic. By choosing an interesting topic, students enjoyed exploring what they really thought about something much deeper. Opinion Gap Strategy provided a huge opportunity to the students to speak and to express their opinions on a wide range of issues. However, to make students capable to speak in every cycle by using their own opinion is not an easy thing. There should be a high effort from both the teacher and students.

As it has been revealed in the previous section that this study was conducted to answer the research questions number 1 and 2. So, the following sections will be discussing on how Opinion Gap Strategy could improve students' speaking abilities as well as describing how students' perceptions on this strategy implementation.

The Students' Speaking Abilities Before and After the Application of Opinion Gap Strategy

It is found from the preliminary studies that students were more likely lacking confidence and motivations to deliver their ideas in oral test presentation. This occurred because the students tried to memorize the story without understanding the meaning of the story itself therefore they found difficulties to retell the story by using their own words.

However, by having applied the Opinion Gap Strategy, the students became more active, were well engaged, and confident to communicate with

their friends. They were more interested and motivated to learn because this strategy provides opportunities to the students' opinions, ideas, and feelings.

In this case, the words 'ideas', opinions', 'thoughts', and 'feelings' were related to the abilities of the students' cognitive thinking about the topic which affirmed that they were able to express their emotions deeply dealing with the discussion materials.

The researcher used questionnaire checklist as the learning media to help the students to answer the questions by spreading out the real messages of their thoughts based on the specific topic. At first cycle, the specific topic was 'music' and for the second, it was 'movie'.

When selecting the specific topics, the researcher focused only on the interesting ones that were relevant. Topics that the students wanted to talk about. It can be seen from the researcher's direct observation that students really liked to discuss about the topics if they were enthusiastic to express their ideas, opinions, and feelings which referred to the meanings of the messages of communication.

These are also related to elements of PALS (Performance Assessment for Language Students), such as task completion and comprehensibility as the big picture domains which reflect the communication of the message. Consequently, these elements are affected by fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, and language control.

Comprehensibility measures how much interpretation of the message is required by a sympathetic listener in order to understand the students' responses. Similarly, fluency measures the ease in which the speakers delivered the messages. Meanwhile, pronunciation measures the effectiveness of the communication and the evaluation of this element was not based on the number of errors but rather on how the quality of the pronunciation facilitated the communication of message. In addition, Vocabulary and language control reflect the students' accuracies and varieties of the language. Therefore, every element of PALS has a real connection with the implementation of Opinion Gap Strategy because this strategy provides the result of communication by expressing the students' ideas, opinions, feelings and thoughts by which their speaking abilities improved.

The Students' Progress After The Application of Opinion Gap Strategy

After applying the strategy, the students' progress in speaking abilities improved. The students were able to speak by delivering their own thoghts, feelings, and opinions using questionnaire checklist as the medium for Opinion Gap Strategy.

Creating a medium for students could be a motivating factor to improve their speaking abilities. This confirms that explaining the importance of speaking by using questionnaire checklist would encourage students to speak English in class. It is shown from the students test result on every cycle.

It revealed that in first cycle, the students had not yet achieved the criteria of success because some students still had difficulties in their speaking performance as the consequence of lack of confidence, limited amount of vocabulary as well as difficulties to put ideas.

It can be seen from their responses to the exercises especially in the task completion. They could not explore their thoughts more, because the sentences were commonly repeated from the exercises without giving the reason why they liked to choose it.

The Students' Responses After the Application of Opinion Gap Strategy

Besides the test, the questionnaire and observation result proved that the students' responses were positive towards Opinion Gap Strategy in the

learning process. From the students' responses to the questionnaire, the researcher found that most of students were easy to learn speaking through the implementation of this strategy.

They recognized that their speaking abilities before knowing and using this strategy was bad. But having known and used it, their speaking abilities improved as this provided opportunities and motivations for the students to speak or to produce the language.

The Effectiveness of Opinion Gap Strategy

The researcher found that Opinion Gap Strategy was effective and useful for the students to improve their speaking abilities. There were some points about the effectiveness of the strategy as follows.

First, the strategy was practical and easy to be applied by the teacher in the classroom. It is supported by the statement from the English teacher of SMA Negeri 6 Ambon who said that Opinion Gap Strategy was very useful to help the students to speak naturally by using their own words. It also made them feel confident in bringing their ideas. Besides, the material was easy and simple to be applied as the teacher used interesting topic to improve the students' comprehension.This strategy has already been applied by the teacher in another class at her teaching schedule

Second, the strategy was effective to make the students be individually active in the class, confident, and thinking inductively. According to Keegan (2009), Opinion Gap can improve students speaking skills at any situation and help students to interact. As for the shy students, they are helped through this strategy. In other words, this strategy provides questions and then the answers come from their own message, as the students with difficulty in conversation can be liberated.

Third, this strategy encouraged students' interests and motivated them to learn because this strategy provides students' own opinions, ideas, and feeling.s Through Opinion Gap, students learned how to express idea, feelings to each other by answering questionnaires or asking and answering questions on cards. Moreover, the students got the opportunities to state what they really thought about something or to discuss a relevant topic in depth and to express their opinions in pairs or in small groups.

CONCLUSION

One of the main purposes of this research was to find out the students' improvement in speaking abilities especially in class X⁴ of SMA Negeri 6 Ambon and the result shows that students speaking abilities has improved.

By implementing the Opinion Gap Strategy in teaching speaking, the students had chances to interact in speaking activities. This strategy could help and motivate students to speak or to express their opinions, ideas, and feelings about a given topic.

The problems from the students that the English teacher and the researcher found after evaluation in the first cycle could be improved in the second cycle. The students' scores from the first cycle and the second cycle which did not meet the expectation level improved and could achieve almost meets expectation level to meet expectation level in the second cycle.

The Opinion Gap Strategy also provided positive effects to the students. Based on the questionnaire result, the students agreed and expected the implementation of Opinion Gap Strategy to improving their speaking abilities in the teaching and learning process especially in English subject.

Therefore, it can be concluded that this strategy was successful in improving students speaking abilities at class X⁴ of SMA Negeri 6 Ambon.

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