

Improving Sixth Grade Students' Speaking Skill Through Information Gap with Different Task Types and Complexity

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บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยครั้งนี้มีจุดประสงค์เพื่อพัฒนาทักษะการพูดของนักเรียนระดับชั้นประถมศึกษาปีที่ 6 โดยใช้กิจกรรม The information gap ซึ่งเรียงลำดับกิจกรรมตามความยากง่าย ระหว่างกิจกรรมข้อมูลที่เป็นปริศนา (Jigsaw) และกิจกรรมการสื่อสารโดยใช้รูปภาพ (Picture description) และเพื่อศึกษาความพึงพอใจ (Attitude) ของนักเรียนต่อรูปแบบการสอน The information gap ทั้ง 2 กิจกรรม กลุ่มตัวอย่างถูกคัดเลือกจากการสุ่มแบบเจาะจงประกอบไปด้วย นักเรียนระดับประถมศึกษาปีที่ 6 โรงเรียนเอกชนแห่งหนึ่ง จำนวน 24 คน เครื่องมือในการวิจัยประกอบด้วย 1) แผนการจัดการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อการสื่อสารโดยเน้นกิจกรรม The information gap 2) แบบทดสอบวัดความสามารถด้านทักษะการพูดภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อการสื่อสาร 3) แบบสอบถามวัดเจตคติต่อการจัดการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อการสื่อสาร ผลการวิจัยพบว่า

นักเรียนมีการพัฒนาทักษะด้านการพูดภาษาอังกฤษโดยใช้กิจกรรม The information gap ตามลำดับความยากง่าย และนักเรียนมีความพึงพอใจต่อรูปแบบการสอนโดยใช้กิจกรรม The information gap ในระดับมากที่สุด ซึ่งการจัดรูปแบบกิจกรรมแบบ The information gap ช่วยให้นักเรียนมีโอกาสได้ฝึกทักษะการพูดภาษาอังกฤษตามความเหมาะสมกับระดับชั้นในการเรียน อีกทั้งยังสร้างความมั่นใจให้นักเรียนในการพูดมากขึ้น

คำสำคัญ : ผลสัมฤทธิ์ทางการจัดการเรียนรู้เพื่อพัฒนาทักษะการพูด การใช้รูปแบบการสอนที่ต่างกัน การจัดการเรียนรู้แบบการเกิดช่องว่างทางด้านข้อมูล เจตคติของนักเรียน

ABSTRACT

The aims of this research are to: 1) develop the English speaking skill of sixth grade students using information gap through jigsaw and picture description activities, based on the complexity of the activities, and 2) study students' attitudes towards the use of information gap. The samples used in the research were 24 students in sixth grade in both activities, selected through simple random sampling from a private school in northeastern Thailand. The instruments used in the research were: 1) the lesson plans for English communication course emphasizing information gap activities, 2) the tests of English speaking skill for communication, and

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3) the questionnaire of attitudes towards the learning activities. The research results revealed that the students developed English speaking skill through the use of information gap activities which were arranged according to the complexity of activities. The students were satisfied at the highest level with the use of information gap in teaching. In conclusion, information gap activities could help students in practicing their English speaking skill appropriately based upon their class level and also build more confidence in speaking English.

Keywords: Achievement in Learning to Develop English Speaking Skill, Using Teaching Different Models, Information Gap Activities, Students' Attitudes

Introduction

Language has an important function in the society. It is a communication tool among people in the society. It helps transferring knowledge and thoughts while building an understanding among people in the nation and across the nations. According to the communicative approach, foreign language teaching aims at the following goal: the students can use their knowledge of language to communicate, and use it effectively in real situations. This teaching paradigm focuses on the contents of communication instead of discrete grammar points. In other words, learning languages does not mean learning only the grammar, but also developing the ability to communicate by speaking fluently and meaningfully. In order to accomplish such a goal, various factors are involved. One of the most important factors is classroom activities emphasizing the practice of understandable language among students which could help them well in improving their proficiency. Teachers should prepare themselves by frequently obtaining new knowledge, and creating exciting activities that draw students' attention. Such activities could help in more successful English study among students. (Thanomwattana, 2008)

Nowadays, the study of English is based

on communicative approach and focused on improving learners' skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Speaking skill, for a lot of Thai students, is the most important skill in revealing successful language study because it is shown in public in two-way communication. The speakers have to think on their feet and respond in real time to express their thoughts. The study of English in Thailand today is not very successful due to various factors. For example, teachers use inappropriate teaching techniques. Students are too shy to speak or speak softly to avoid being embarrassed. Often, teachers do not engage students in learning activities. That is, learning activities only emphasize prescribed usage, but not practical use. Consequently, learning activities do not interest students. The result of all the factors is the negative attitudes against teachers, and the subject, i.e. the English language. Moreover, English is only a foreign language in Thailand, so students do not usually have exposure to it outside the classroom. It is commonplace that Thai students do not have enough opportunities to practice English communication skills. (Poomsaidorn , 1997)

From the problems mentioned earlier, the researchers realized that classroom learning activi-

ties are vital to students' skill development. One of the activities suggested by communicative language teaching is the Information Gap. According to existing literature, this kind of activity supports the use of all four skills providing students with more opportunities to improve their English to use in real situations. According to Harmer (1986), the premise of this activity is that in a given communicative event, the speaker and the interlocutor do not have the information about each other, so they must try to communicate in order to reduce or rid of the gap in the information between each other. While they are exchanging information, they may communicate using non-formal language with incorrect grammar until they accomplish some degree of correctness as specified. (Aungwattanakul , 1996)

Several classroom activities are considered Information Gap activities; however, there are two types that the researchers believe suitable for the level of this research: the jigsaw activity and picture description. Johnson (1982: 163) defined the jigsaw activity as the blending of information transfer and Information Gap using distinct activities distributed among individual students. The first student is assigned to practice one skill, and the second student is assigned to practice another skill on the same topic. After that, each of them must exchange their information in order to finish the task. For example, a teacher gives symbolic contents for the topic 1 to the first student, then the student is asked to transfer it into the content messages. At the same time, the second student receives the topic 1's content messages directly from the teacher, then the student is asked to transfer it back to symbolic content. Finally, they exchange their information in order to accomplish their tasks.

Littlewood (1981) contributed to the communi-

cation activity with picture description. In this activity, the teacher also asks students to work in pairs; one of each pair may have different kinds of pictures such as a triangle, a rectangle, scenic views, or human beings which should be explained in words to the other student of the pair. Then, the second student of the pair must draw a picture which is similar to the one that the first student has.

From our study of the Information Gap activity types proposed by Littlewood (1981), we believe that speaking skills are used more in the picture description activity, in which the students are required to reproduce a picture based on the verbal description. This needs substantial speaking and listening skills. Inductively, it could be concluded that the picture description activity is more difficult than the jigsaw activity. Thus, the jigsaw activity should precede the picture description so that the students could build their skills for a more advanced task.

Referring to the importance and benefits of such learning management, this could be applied to the idea of basic classroom activities to develop skills in solving communicative problems. Students could be motivated by such activities which support them to accomplish higher learning achievement, and develop good attitudes in the English subject.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study were:

1. To develop speaking skill of Pratomsuksa 6 students using Information Gap activities which were ordered based on their complexity: the jigsaw activity and picture description
2. To study students' attitudes towards the use of Information Gap based on both activities



Research Questions

1. Can the two Information Gap learning activities, namely the jigsaw and picture description, which are ordered based on their complexity for PRATOMSUKSA 6 students help in their development of speaking skill, and if so, how?

2. Do students have good attitudes towards the teaching method using both Information Gap activities?

Scope of the Study

The scope of this research involved the Information Gap learning activities which were ordered according to their complexity; these included the jigsaw activity and picture description. The skill in focus is the speaking skill of Pratomsuksa 6 students, which is the last year of elementary education in Thailand, where English is considered a foreign language, and is a required subject in school.

Research Methodology

Population and Sample Group

The population for this study was 57 students from Pratomsuksa 6 and the sample group was 24 students in the first semester of the academic year 2011 who were randomly selected based on their English grades from the previous year. There were three groups of students: 'excellent' (received grade A), 'moderate' (received grade B), and 'weak' (received grade C).

Research Instruments

Research instruments were as follows :

1. A course syllabus of English for Communication focusing on Information Gap activities carried out by integration of jigsaw activity and picture description activity. Four lesson plans were created using

the teaching method of Communicative Language Teaching integrated with the subject contents. Each of the lessons took six hours to teach. Then jigsaw activity and picture description activity were applied by synthesizing the idea of the components of Task-based Activities Framework (Willis, 2000). This consists of three phases that support students to be able to communicate using language. The researchers designed the phases of course plans as follows. 1) Pre-task phase concerns with introduction to the course by informing the students of the objectives of the course, their roles in class, the in-class activities, and the evaluation before continuing with the class. 2) Task cycle phase assigns situations to the students using picture, storytelling, and choosing topics by letting the students listen or read under the specified situation or roles. The topics comprise vocabularies, and language models to be taught; moreover, some previous vocabularies are elicited by the teacher using questions, and strategies to encourage students to speak. 3) Language focus phase concerns with analysis, discussion of activity topics specified in the work sheets for students. Students should be able to learn words, phrases, sentence structures from each lesson, and practice phonetics from new vocabularies, phrases, and newly found sentence structures. The teacher should observe students' behaviors and use statistics to keep track of the students' speaking skill development in both activities and use this information for further development in teaching methods. The two jigsaw activities were under the topics "What do you like to do in your free time?" and "What country do you want to go to?" respectively. The two picture description activities were named "What is he/she like?" and "What is it?" respectively.

Table 1. The speaking skill criteria for Pratomsuksa 6 students

Scores/ Aspects	1	2	3	4	5
Fluency	Speech often has pauses and is very hard to understand.	Speech is stilted with constant pauses and often hard to understand.	Speech is rather slow with occasional pauses but somewhat understandable.	Speech is rather smooth and generally understandable.	Speech is smooth and understandable.
Vocabulary	Speech often has wrong word choice and is very hard to understand.	Speech has limited vocabulary and often with wrong word choice.	Speech has sufficient vocabulary but occasionally with wrong word choice.	Speech has a variety of word choice with some accuracy.	Speech has a wide variety of word choice with accuracy.
Grammar	Speech has confusing sentence structures and is very hard to understand.	Speech has many incorrect sentence structures and is hard to understand.	Speech has some incorrect sentence structures and is somewhat hard to understand.	Speech generally has correct sentence structures with a few errors but is understandable.	Speech has correct sentence structures and effective in communication.
Pronunciation	Stress and intonation are mostly unclear and not understandable.	Stress and intonation are often incorrect and unclear.	Stress and intonation are sometimes incorrect, and are somewhat unclear.	Stress and intonation are generally correct but with a few errors.	Speak with clear and correct stress and intonation.

2. English speaking skill performance test for English for Communication course was created using Heaton' (1990:68-71) and Ur's (1996:135) modified English speaking criteria to suit the Pratomsuksa 6 students. The test covered four aspects: fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. The scores were measured from 1 to 5 for each aspect, bringing the highest total score to 20 points. The meaning of each score can be seen in the following table.

3. Evaluation form of attitudes towards learning management in English for Communication course was created using 5 level Likert rating scale from highest, high, moderate, low, and lowest. The

attitude evaluation forms of 10 questions towards speaking skill development using the Information Gap were answered by sixth grade students.

Data Collection

Data collection was carried out in the following steps.

1. The field researcher (the first author of this paper) notified the students about the study before teaching the four lesson plans of 6 hours each.

2. The students took an examination on English speaking skill performance in English for Communication course for each lesson plan and recorded their speeches into a recording device for



Table 2. The scores from the speaking tests in the group of excellent academic performance using Information Gap learning activities

Activities	N	Total Score	\bar{X}	S.D	Performance level in Speaking English for Communication
Information Gap 1 (jigsaw activities)	8	20	13.88	0.82	High
Information Gap 2 (jigsaw activities)	8	20	15.58	0.58	High
Information Gap 3 (picture description)	8	20	16.88	0.35	Highest
Information Gap 4 (picture description)	8	20	19.13	0.35	Highest

reconsideration. The scores of the tests came from three raters: one being the teacher/researcher, the other two being English teachers in the same school who were familiarized with the evaluation criteria of speaking skills presented above (Table 1). The scores were averaged among the three raters to obtain the final scores.

3. Then the students answered the evaluation form of attitudes towards the use of Information Gap activities to improve speaking skill. The final scores of the speaking skill test were used for statistical analysis together with the analysis of the evaluation form of attitudes towards the teaching method.

Data Analysis

In the data analysis, the researcher calculated the scores of the four speaking skill tests from the first to the fourth lesson plans to obtain the arithmetic mean () and standard deviation (S.D.).

Then, the scores from the attitude evaluation form were also calculated to obtain the arithmetic mean () and standard deviation (S.D.).

Results of the Study

The speaking skill scores obtained from Pratomuksa 6 students were reported based on their starting level of proficiency: excellent, moderate, and weak academic performance.

According to the table, the performance of English speaking for communication using Information Gap activities among the students in the excellent academic performance group was at a high level in the first two activities and then increased to highest. As shown in the table, lesson plan 1, the jigsaw activity was considered to be at high level with average score of 13.88 and S.D. of 0.82. Lesson plan 2 was another jigsaw activity and was considered to be at a high level with average score of 15.58 and S.D. of 0.58. Lesson plan 3 was picture description and was considered to be at the highest level with average score of 16.88 and S.D. of 0.35. Lesson plan 4 was picture description and was considered to be at the highest level with average score of 19.13 and S.D. of 0.35. In other words, the students' performance was good to begin with, but with some more practice with the more challenging activities, their speech became better.

They could speak simple sentences without hesitations, and with clear pronunciation.

According to the table, the performance level of English speaking for communication using Information Gap activities in the students in the moderate academic performance group gradually increased. As shown in the table, lesson plan 1, a jigsaw activity, was considered to be at moderate level with average score of 10.38 and S.D. of 0.72. Lesson plan 2, another jigsaw activity, was considered to be at high level with average score

of 12.58 and S.D. of 0.50. Lesson plan 3, a picture description, was considered to be at the high level with average score of 14.71 and S.D. of 0.49. Lesson plan 4, a picture description, was considered to be at the highest level with average score of 16.50 and S.D. of 0.36. This means that this group of students started off with some errors and unclear pronunciation. In the course of all the activities, their speech became more fluent with fewer errors in both pronunciation and word choice.

Table 3. The scores from the speaking tests in the group of moderate academic performance using Information Gap learning activities

Activities	N	Total Score	\bar{X}	S.D	Performance level in Speaking English for Communication
Information Gap 1 (jigsaw activities)	8	20	10.38	0.72	Moderate
Information Gap 2 (jigsaw activities)	8	20	12.58	0.50	High
Information Gap 3 (picture description)	8	20	14.71	0.49	High
Information Gap 4 (picture description)	8	20	16.50	0.36	Highest

Table 4. The scores from the speaking tests in the group of weak academic performance using Information Gap learning activities

Activities	N	Total Score	\bar{X}	S.D	Performance level in Speaking English for Communication
Information Gap 1 (jigsaw activities)	8	20	7.83	0.71	Moderate
Information Gap 2 (jigsaw activities)	8	20	10.79	0.35	Moderate
Information Gap 3 (picture description)	8	20	13.17	0.62	High
Information Gap 4 (picture description)	8	20	14.96	0.38	High



According to the table, the performance of English speaking for communication using Information Gap activities of the students in the weak academic performance group also increased correspondingly. As shown in the table, lesson plan 1, a jigsaw activity, was considered to be at moderate level with average score of 7.83 and S.D. of 0.71. Lesson plan 2, a jigsaw activity, was considered to be at moderate level with average score of 10.79 and S.D. of 0.35. Lesson plan 3, a picture description, was considered to be at the high level with average score of 13.17 and S.D. of 0.62. Lesson plan 4, a picture description, was considered to be at the high level with average score of 14.96 and S.D. of 0.38. To put another way, this group

of students began with relatively low fluency and occasional errors. Through all activities, they could improve their speech to a satisfactory level.

According to Figure 1, the average scores of English speaking skill of PATHOMSUKSA 6 students by using Information Gap activities in course plans 1-4 consistently increased for each group of students.

The result obtained from Patomsuksa 6 students' attitudes towards the development of speaking skill using Information Gap activities is reported below. Please note that the evaluation form was written in Thai, and was translated into English for the purpose of publication.

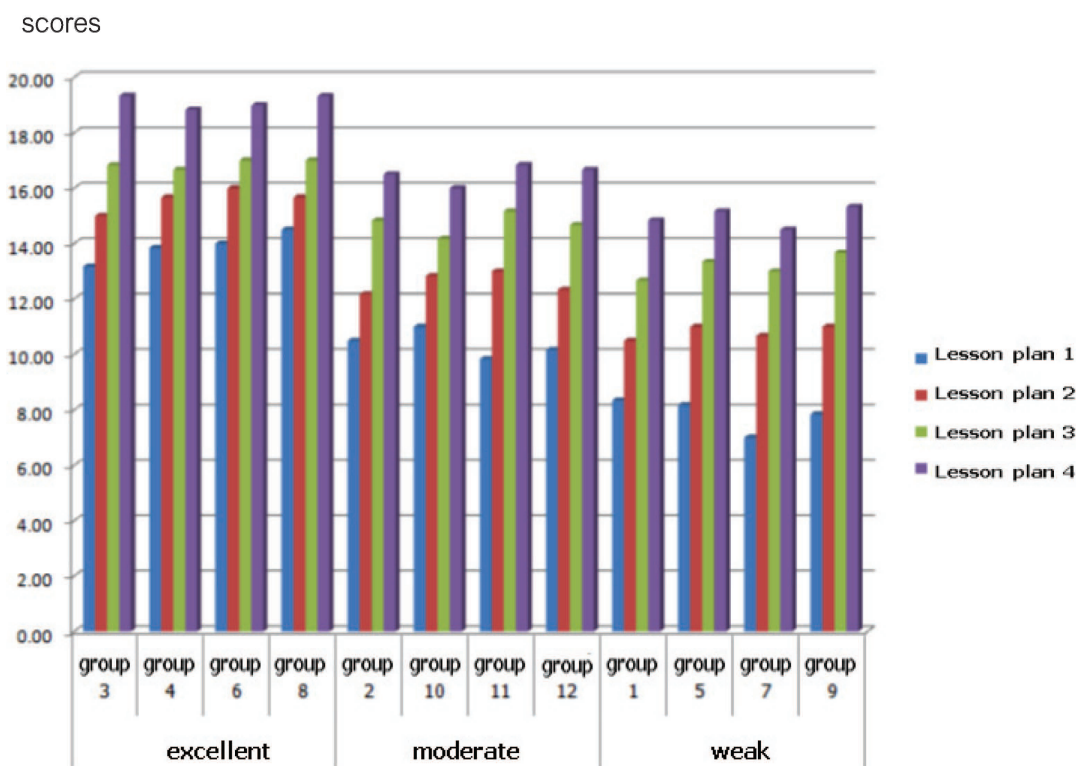


Figure 1. An overview of English speaking scores obtained from Patomsuksa 6 students by using Information Gap activities in lesson plans 1-4.

Table 5. Pratomsuksa 6 students' attitudes level towards the development of speaking skill using Information Gap activities

Number	Evaluation aspects	\bar{X}	S.D.	Attitude level
1	Information Gap activities were interesting.	4.38	0.58	High
2	Information Gap activities encouraged students' thoughts and skills.	4.42	0.65	High
3	Information Gap activities maintained students' attention.	4.42	0.65	High
4	Information Gap activities helped students' to develop confidence in speaking English.	4.13	0.74	High
5	The teacher explained the process of Information Gap activities clearly.	3.88	0.54	High
6	Information Gap activities were the bases of English speaking development skill.	4.50	0.66	High
7	The teacher's lessons are interesting and relevant.	4.33	0.48	High
8	Students learned some strategies in studying by themselves.	4.63	0.58	Highest
9	Students enjoyed themselves by learning through Information Gap activities.	4.38	0.65	High
10	The teacher applied learning medias to draw students' attention.	4.29	0.69	High
overall average		4.34	0.62	High

According to the table, the overall scores of Pratomsuksa 6 students' attitudes towards English speaking skill development using Information Gap activities is at a high level with the average score of 4.34 and average standard deviation of 0.62.

Discussion

The Information Gap activities modified from Heaton's (1990) and Ur's (1996) English speaking evaluation criteria used in lesson plans 1 - 4 for

English speaking skill among Pratomsuksa 6 students of excellent, moderate, and weak academic achievement groups resulted in the sequential increasing of the overall scores in speaking skill in the English for Communication course. This revealed that each group developed its higher level of English speaking skill which encouraged students to continue their. Learning management using clean steps and teaching guidelines from Information Gap activities also helped students to get the op-



portunity to practice speaking English appropriately according to their level of knowledge. Moreover, it could help students to speak with more confidence. Additionally, the evaluation process judged by the raters in order to find an average score of English speaking skill among Patomsuksa 6 students led to realization among students about their strength and the areas needed to be improved regarding their English speaking skill which could be beneficial for further development.

Pratomsuksa 6 students' attitude towards English speaking skill development using Information Gap activities using Boonchom Srisaad's (Srisaad, B. 2002 : 99) score criterion revealed that the overall students' attitude score is at high level since the students have learnt English according to their potentials and interests. They also had a chance to practice in simulated situations which encouraged them to develop their speaking skill and thoughts via a systematic learning process. Consequently, they have developed a higher proficiency in speaking skill and satisfaction in speaking skill activities using the Information Gap.

Conclusion and Suggestions

This research is the study of speaking skill development in Patomsuksa 6 students using Information Gap activities which are ordered according to the complexity of activities, namely jigsaw and picture description activities, and the students' attitudes towards the use of Information Gap in teaching using both Information Gap activities. In this research, the Information Gap activities were used in teaching English to students based on their academic achievement categorization into excellent, moderate, and weak groups. In this way, they

could learn to practice speaking English and work according to their potentials. Then each group were monitored for its development focusing less on grammar correctness than the abilities to carry on understandable communication and the confidence in speaking English. The purpose was to help students to develop good attitudes and to encourage them in further learning of English speaking skill.

Further research studies should involve the teaching method using various Information Gap activities to develop English speaking skills in students of higher education levels. There should be research projects related to English teaching using Information Gap activities for proficiency development in other skills, namely listening, reading, and writing in English courses.

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