

## Improving Sixth Grade Students' Speaking Skills through Information Gap with Different Task Types and Complexity

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### บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยครั้งนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์ **ประการแรก** เพื่อพัฒนาทักษะการพูดของนักเรียนระดับชั้นประถมศึกษาปีที่ 6 โดยใช้กิจกรรม The information Gap ซึ่งเรียงลำดับกิจกรรมตามความยากง่าย ระหว่างกิจกรรมข้อมูลที่เป็นปริศนา (Jigsaw) และกิจกรรมการสื่อสารโดยใช้รูปภาพ (Picture description) และ**ประการที่สอง** เพื่อศึกษาความพึงพอใจ ของนักเรียนต่อรูปแบบการสอน The information Gap ทั้ง 2 กิจกรรม กลุ่มตัวอย่างถูกคัดเลือกจากการสุ่มแบบเจาะจงประกอบไปด้วย นักเรียนระดับประถมศึกษาปีที่ 6 โรงเรียนเอกชนแห่งหนึ่งในภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือ จำนวน 24 คน เครื่องมือในการวิจัยประกอบด้วย 1. แผนการจัดการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อการสื่อสารโดยเน้นกิจกรรม The information gap 2. แบบทดสอบวัดความสามารถด้านทักษะการพูดวิชาภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อการสื่อสาร และ 3. แบบสอบถามวัดเจตคติต่อการจัดการเรียนรู้ภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อการสื่อสาร ผลการวิจัยพบว่า

นักเรียนมีการพัฒนาทักษะด้านการพูดภาษาอังกฤษโดยใช้กิจกรรม The information gap ตามลำดับความยากง่าย และนักเรียนมีความพึงพอใจต่อรูปแบบการสอนโดยใช้กิจกรรม The information gap ในระดับมากที่สุดซึ่งการจัด รูปแบบกิจกรรมแบบ The information gap ช่วยให้นักเรียนมีโอกาสได้ฝึกทักษะการพูดภาษาอังกฤษตามความเหมาะสมกับระดับชั้นในการเรียน อีกทั้งยังสร้างความมั่นใจให้นักเรียนในการพูดมากขึ้น

**คำสำคัญ :** ผลสัมฤทธิ์ทางการจัดการเรียนรู้เพื่อพัฒนาทักษะการพูด การใช้รูปแบบการสอนที่แตกต่างกัน การจัดการเรียนรู้แบบการเกิดช่องว่างทางด้าน เจตคติของนักเรียน

### ABSTRACT

The aims of this research are two folds: 1) to develop the speaking skills of Grade 6<sup>th</sup> students using Information Gap activities, i.e. jigsaw and picture description, based on the complexity of the activities, and 2) to study students' attitudes towards the use of Information Gap. In both activities, the sample group was randomly selected; this included 24 Grade 6<sup>th</sup> students from a private school in the Northeast of Thailand. The research instruments were the lesson plans for an English Communication course emphasizing Information Gap activities, tests of Communicative English speaking skills, and an evaluation form for assessing the students' attitudes towards these learning activities. The research results revealed that the students' English speaking skills improved through the use of Information Gap activities arranged according to their levels of complexity. The students' satisfaction with Information Gap activities was found at the highest level. In summary, Information Gap activities could help the students in practicing their English speaking skills appropriately according to their class level and increasing their confidence in speaking.

**Keywords:** Information Gap Activities, English Speaking Skills, Students' Attitudes

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## 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 communicate effectively in real situations. (Thanomwattana, 2008) 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. (Poomsaiorn , 1997) Students are too shy to speak or speak softly to avoid being embar-

rassed.(Poomsaiorn , 1997) 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. (Poomsaiorn , 1997) 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. (Poomsaiorn , 1997)

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

saw 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 communication 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 Grade 6th 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 Grade 6<sup>th</sup> students help to develop their 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 Grade 6th 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 Grade 6th and the sample group was



24 students in the first semester of the academic year 2011. They were randomly selected by 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.

- 1.1 Pre-task phase, the teacher informed the students of the objectives of the course, their roles in class, the in-class activities, and the evaluation before continuing with the class.

- 1.2 At task cycle phase, the teacher assigned 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.

- 1.3 At language focus phase, the teacher analyzed and discussed about activity topics

specified in the work sheets for students. Students learned words, phrases, sentence structures from each lesson, and practice phonetics from new vocabularies, phrases, and newly found sentence structures. The teacher observed students' behaviors and recorded statistics of the students' speaking skill development in both activities for further improvement of 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.

2. English speaking skill performance test for English for Communication course was based on the tests of Heaton (1990 : 68-71) and Ur (1996 : 135). The researcher modified English speaking criteria to suit the Grade 6<sup>th</sup> 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 to show positive attitudes from highest, high, moderate, low, and lowest of each score can be seen in the following ; Boonchom Srisaad's (Srisaad , B (2002). positive attitudes from 4.51-5.00 means highest positive attitudes from 3.51-4.50 means high positive attitudes from 2.51-3.00 means moderate positive attitudes from 1.51-2.00 means low positive attitudes from 1.00-1.50 means lowest

The attitude evaluation forms of 10 questions towards speaking skill development using the Information Gap were answered by grade 6<sup>th</sup> students.

**Table 1.** The speaking skill criteria for grade 6<sup>th</sup> students

Scores/Aspects	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Fluency</b>	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.
<b>Vocabulary</b>	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.
<b>Grammar</b>	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.
<b>Pronunciation</b>	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.

### 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 for 6 hours each.

2. The students took an English speaking skill test for Communication course after each les-

son and recorded their speeches into a recording device for evaluation. 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.



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

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

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 all the four speaking skill tests and the scores from the attitude evaluation for mean ( $\bar{X}$ ) and standard deviation (S.D.). Then, the scores from the attitude evaluation form were also calculated to obtain the arithmetic mean ( $\bar{X}$ ) and standard deviation (S.D.).

### Results of the Study

The speaking skill scores obtained from Grade 6<sup>th</sup> students were reported in Table 2, 3,4 and 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 1, the jigsaw activity was considered to be at high level with average score of 13.88 and S.D. of 0.82. Lesson 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 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 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 1, a jigsaw activity, was considered to be at moderate level with average score of 10.38 and S.D. of 0.72. Lesson 2, another jigsaw activity, was considered to be at high level with average score of 12.58 and S.D. of 0.50. Lesson 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 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. learning activities

**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
1. Information Gap 1 (jigsaw activities)	8	20	10.38	0.72	Moderate
2. Information Gap 2 (jigsaw activities)	8	20	12.58	0.50	High
3. Information Gap 3 (picture description)	8	20	14.71	0.49	High
4. 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

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

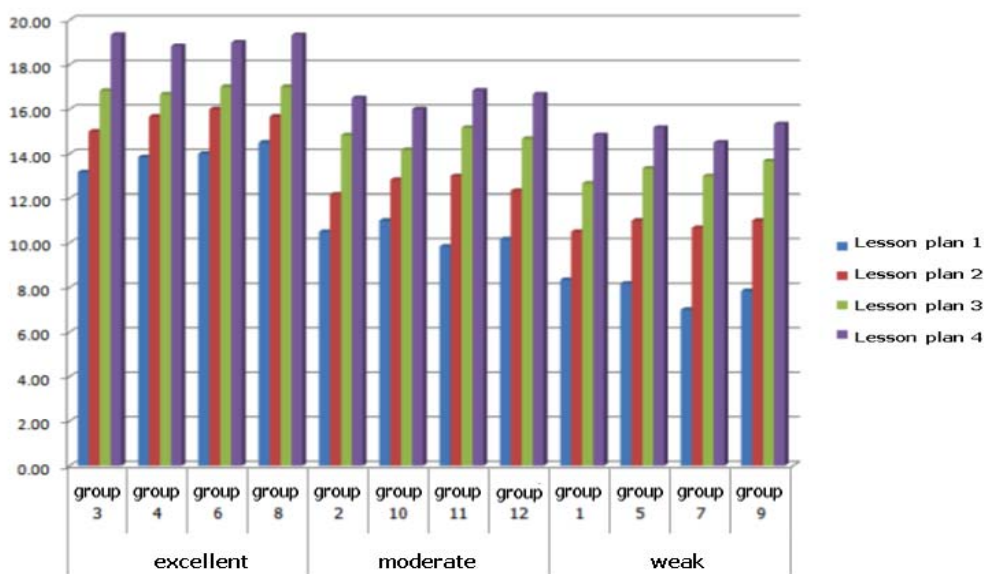


Figure 1. An overview of English speaking scores obtained from Grade 6<sup>th</sup> students by using Information Gap activities in lesson plans 1-4

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. It is remarkable that this group of students started from relatively low fluency. Through all activities, they could improve their speech to a satisfactory level.

### Scores

According to Figure 1, the average scores of English speaking skill in activities from lessons 1-4

consistently increased in 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. The higher scores show the higher positive attitude.

According to the table, the overall scores of Grade 6th 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 Grade 6th 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 speak-

ing skill which encouraged students to continue their skill. 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 grade 6<sup>th</sup> 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.

Grade 6<sup>th</sup> students' positive attitude towards English speaking skill activities revealed that they were satisfied with their English through these ac-

tivities. It could be interpreted that these activities were appropriate to their proficiency and interests.

Boonchom Srisaad's (Srisa-ad, 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.

Table 5. Pratomsuksa 6 students' evaluation aspects and interpretation of positive attitude level.

Number	Evaluation aspects	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	Interpretation of positive 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



## Conclusion and Suggestions

This research is the study of speaking skill development in Grade 6th 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 speaking skill to students categorized by their academic achievement as excellent, moderate, and weak groups their proficiency. 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 and the students' confidence to communicate in English. The purpose was to help students to develop good attitudes and to encourage them for further practice of English speaking skill.

Further research studies should involve the teaching method using various Information Gap activities to develop other 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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