

AN ECLECTIC METHOD: A COOPERATIVE TASK-BASED LEARNING METHOD IN DEVELOPING STUDENTS' ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS AT PHITSANULOK PITTAJAKOM SCHOOL

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Abstract

The purposes of this study were to design lesson plans in the teaching and learning of English as a second language/foreign language using Task-Based Learning and Cooperative Learning, plus Contextual Learning, and to investigate the effectiveness of the blended method-Cooperative Task-based Learning method in developing the speaking skills of the seventh-grade students at Phitsanulok Pittayakom School. The participants were 31 Science Math and Technology program students who were selected via clustered random sampling. The instruments used for collecting the data were pre-test and post-test without a control group, lesson plans, semi-structured focus group interviews, and the Common European Framework of References for Languages descriptors and scales, both holistic and analytic rating scales. The results of this study showed that the English speaking skills of the students improved by one level higher than their previous level, from being basic to intermediate language users. The English speaking skills of the seventh grade were statistically significant at 0.01 level. There were statistically significant differences between the mean scores on the pre-test and post-test in the overall speaking skills of the students.

Keywords: cooperative learning, task-based learning, speaking skill

Introduction

Learning a foreign language like English, as an international language, is a big advantage for Thai people and their country. English is widely used in travel and tourism, and international business transactions. It might be the most essential language of global business success nowadays (Clark, 2012).

Recently, Thailand has become one of the four Asian Tiger Cub Economies in Southeast Asia and one of the prospect top-performing economies of 2015 (Lyons, 2015). Thailand's Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2008) has been paying attention to the significance of the English language in Thai society. The Thai government and the Thai parents invest a lot of money in education in hoping to make their young ones more competitive and skillful in dealing with social demands through learning the English language. Still, many Thai students can hardly communicate in English after so many years of learning it ("Why Can't Thais Speak English?", 2012).

Sae-Ong (2010) stated that problems relating to the teaching and learning process of English language concern both teachers and learners. She added that this problem might be influenced by the teaching methods used. "Thai education institutions, at primary, secondary and tertiary levels, have been criticized by both western and local educationalists for taking a traditional and conservative approach to the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL)" (Brown, 2004). Thai English teachers seemed not to see any problem regarding this method of teaching the English language (Thomson, 2009). This traditional way of teaching leads to the poor academic performance of Thai students.

Nowadays, many proponents of 21st century skills supported learner-centered methods, as opposed to the teacher-centered classroom (Rotherham & Willingham, 2009). Some of these methods are Task-based Learning (TBL) and Cooperative Learning (CL) (Baesa, 2011).

Hasan (2014) constructed a TBL program in the teaching and learning of English in a second-year level high school, for the purpose of enhancing the students' English oral performance. The program had two guiding textbooks: a Teacher's Guide and a Students' Activity Book. The Teacher's Guide was used to provide instructional guidelines in teaching and implementing lessons with Task-based techniques. It has

learning objectives, mini exercises, and summative tests. The Students' Activity Book was designed according to the activity-based learning techniques. It provided a venue for "Learning by Doing", in which the students were given communicative tasks to practice with their peers or within themselves. This promotes autonomy in learning. The instruments used were one-way monologue and two-way dialogue test accompanied by an oral performance rubric. The participants were Saudi students of the English language class. The results of the study proved that Task-based Learning is effective in teaching English speaking skills.

Perez & Trujillo (2014) carried out a study on CL in promoting oral production. The participants were twenty-three EFL primary students of Jorge Eliecer Gaitan School at Pereira city in Colombia. The participants were new to the English language as they cannot able to perform simple greetings, follow basic instructions and manage some basic English vocabulary. The researchers used two cooperative learning strategies namely, circle the sage and problem-solving activities. The research projects used the qualitative method of collecting and analyzing the data. The instruments were lesson plans, instructional materials, and observation logs. The findings of the research revealed that there was a positive response from the students of EFL who had the first encounter with the target language. The students developed a sense of empathy, collaborative skills and interest in learning the foreign language.

Livingstone (2010) designed a mixed method for TBL and CL in improving the linguistic and communicative competence through developing the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in the Spanish language. The researcher created guidelines based on the Task-based Learning and Learning Framework:

1. The theme/topic of interest
2. The final task
3. Objectives
4. The linguistic and thematic contents which will be carried out through the teaching module.
5. The sequencing of a task (micro-tasks) leading to the final task (macro task)
6. The evaluation

The results of the study showed that there was a high improvement of students' Spanish speaking performance at an intermediate level when the combined learning model was used.

The researcher of this study intended to blend the two methods, TBL and CL, for the reasons that the eclectic methods for most of the time work well, and combining methods fills each other's strengths and weaknesses. According to Errey & Schollaert (2003), in TBL, CL groups are engaged in a variety of classroom activities that allow the students to help one another to explore the target language they need to solve the problems set in the (real-life) task.

The present study deals with an eclectic method of TBL and CL. The objectives of this study are to design lesson plans for teaching and learning English as Second Language/Foreign Language for speaking skills using TBL and CL, plus Contextual Learning (CTL) and to investigate its effectiveness in developing the English speaking skills of the students. The researcher hypothesized that the Cooperative Task-based Learning (CTBL) method is effective in developing the English speaking skills of junior high school students at Phitsanulok Pittayakom school.

The CTBL is an eclectic method from CL and TBL, plus CTL, which was designed to aid and develop the learners' English speaking skills. It promotes an interactive manipulation of the target language with real-world tasks. It enhances social skills, self-esteem, sense of responsibility, and a comfortable learning atmosphere that encourages students to participate in the learning process. It builds cultural relevance and connectivity using reflective learning, from decontextualized to contextualized language, which makes the language learning more inclusive and easy to grasp. The task used in this method is authentic and real-world tasks that focus on meaning, not so much on the form (Skehan, 1998; Bygate et al., 2001; Ellis, 2003). The students' communicative needs are the main priority of CTBL.

Objectives of the Study

This study was conducted to:

1. design lesson plans for teaching and learning English as a foreign language in speaking skills supported by TBL, CL, and CTL for junior high school level students at Phitsanulok Pittayakom school; and

2. investigate the effectiveness of CTBL, a mixed-method, in developing students' speaking skills.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How to design lesson plans in aid of TBL, CL, and CTL for the teaching and learning of ESL/FL?
2. How effective is CTBL, a mixed-method, in developing the students' English speaking skills?

Statement of Hypothesis

The CTBL method is effective in developing the English speaking skills of junior high school students at Phitsanulok Pittayakom school.

Materials and Methods

Materials

The population of this study is the 7th-grade students of Phitsanulok Pittayakom school. The school has 12 classes of 7th-grade students totaling 495 students. The participants of this study were originally 36 seventh graders of the Science Math and Technology (SMAT) program, however, due to the extracurricular school activities, five of them were requested to join the competition. Therefore, they were removed from the data. So, there were only 31 participants in the study. The research materials used in this study are a semi-structured focus group interview, external rating scales, lesson plans, and test tasks.

A semi-structured focus group interview was conducted in the first week of the research implementation that spanned for two days. The results of the interview were used to group the students according to the heterogeneity of their skills. Each group is composed of six students with different levels of language skills, namely, basic, intermediate and advanced users. These groups are essential for CL activities and the language acquisition process. The students in heterogeneous groups helped together to achieve common language goals.

External rating scales, also known as rubrics, are educational assessment tools that measure students' language ability-which consist of language knowledge and strategic competence. These measurement tools are widely used in Task-Based

Language Assessment (TBLA). For this study, The Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR) descriptors and scales, both holistic and analytic, are adapted as external rating scales. These external rating scales have six levels and criteria of spoken interactions concentrating on the conversational skills, in which A1 is the lowest and C2 is the highest level. The CEFR rating scales have a good reputation as an assessment tool and have good validity and reliability assessment degree.

The lesson plans were designed and written following the Basic Education Core Curriculum of 2008 learning objectives, skills-focused, grammatical structures, and vocabulary. The researcher also selected some topics for lesson implementation, from the textbook Access Student's Book 1 by Virginia Evans and Jenny Dooley, which correlate to the grade level indicators.

The test tasks are real-world tasks that elicit students' communicative competence and performance. These tasks are part of the lesson plans and serve as pre-test and post-test that is essential for data analysis. These tests are non-paper-pencil tests and purely performance-based assessments which were measured using CEFR external rating scales. The test results determine the trends of improvement and the success of the study.

Methods

The participants were 31 SMAT students chosen by a clustered random sampling. Students were studying English in the first semester of the 2017 academic year. The length of the experiment had spanned in 17 weeks or 4 months. The implementation of the lesson was three times a week or three hours per week. Before the lesson delivery, the lesson plans and other research instruments called Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) Index were checked by five experts to secure the validity and reliability of the research.

The objectives of the study were to design lesson plans with the aid of TBL and CL for the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language in speaking skills and to explore the effectiveness of CTBL, a mixed-method, in developing students' speaking skills. The study hypothesized that CTBL is effective in developing the English speaking skills of seventh-grade high school students.

This study is action research that aims to improve the English speaking skills of EFL Thai learners using a mixed method of TBL and CL, which is the CTBL method. The researcher intentionally designed and used the CTBL method in the classroom for the reason that the characteristics of both TBL and CL are student-centered, interactive and allow maximum tolerance of students' manipulative nature in dealing with challenges and learning the target language. The researcher had employed professional teachers who acted as instructors and raters during the research implementation because he should not act those roles, except only as an observer to avoid bias influence of the research.

This research is a quasi-experiment with one-group pre-test and post-test design. It has also embodied a quantitative research method in collecting and analyzing the data. It is quantitative in a manner that the study deals with numerical data upon measuring the communicative skills of the students' in CTBL method.

The research data were collected using the test task design that elicits communicative competence and performances. These skills are measured using CEFR external rating scales, which serve as pre-test/post-test without a control group. The purpose of the two tests is to gather significant data about the English speaking skills of the participants of the study, before and after the implementation of the blended method. Similarly, the researcher wanted to emphasize how effective is the CTBL method in developing the English speaking skills of Thai students.

Statistical analysis

The researcher utilized the SPSS application version 19.0 to analyze the data from the pretest and post-test. The data were computed using the mean that was suggested by the University statistician. There were two variables involved in this study. The independent variable is the CTBL method and the dependent variable is the learning achievement of the students. This means that the method used affects the communicative skills/outcome of the students significantly.

The second objective is to investigate the effectiveness of the CTBL method developing students' English speaking skills. The research data were analyzed to determine the result according to this objective. The scores were obtained from test tasks through CEFR rating scales via pre-test and post-test.

Statistical tools

The research tools used in this study are descriptive statistics and independent and paired sample t-test. The data were compared, computed and converted into mean scores. There were two variables involved in this study. The independent variable is the CTBL and the dependent variable is the learning achievement of the students. This means that the method used affects the communicative skills/outcome of the students significantly. The pre-test and post-test scores were analyzed and interpreted to provide interpretations and help conclude the findings of this research. These help to answer the second research question about the affectivity of the blended method in developing the students' English speaking skills.

Results and Discussion

This research aimed to answer the research questions. For the first question of the study, how to design lesson plans in aid of TBL, CL, and CTL. The CTBL Method framework had undergone many changes. These revisions were made to suit the needs of the students.

As for the first structural framework, it was found out that the framework was bombarded with many idealistic concepts that were not realistic in the classroom setting. When it was tested during the reliability test, the students felt uneasy and overloaded with responsibility. This made them stressed out and feeling unmotivated to learn. One of the critics had said that the components of the first CTBL lesson procedures have no unique qualities because it was copied from the structures of TBL and CL. There were only a few differences in the framework: long introduction of the topic and designation of roles. The atmosphere of the classroom was not light and too serious for an English learning activity. These concerns had pushed the researcher to improve the components of the method.

In the second structural framework, the first component was renamed as refreshers, in which the recapitulation was retained and other procedures were removed. The food for thoughts and conversation games were added. The third component was changed from language discussion and application to cold correction, metadata task and lesson summary. The metadata task or word cloud was not effective enough for the students' language learning because of its complexity. It is complicated in the sense that the students have limited vocabulary and poor word

association with the learning experiences. One of the obvious problems was the overuse of vocabulary. The students had tended to use the words multiple times on many occasions because they were very familiar and too easy to use; however, it made the vocabulary of the students very limited.

For the third and final revision, the first component of the second structural framework was renamed from refreshers to small talk and the food for thoughts was removed. The second component was retained. The third component was all changed and renamed from the auxiliary task to culture connections. The culture connections were added to make the students feel comfortable and share more their thoughts and experiences regarding real language learning.

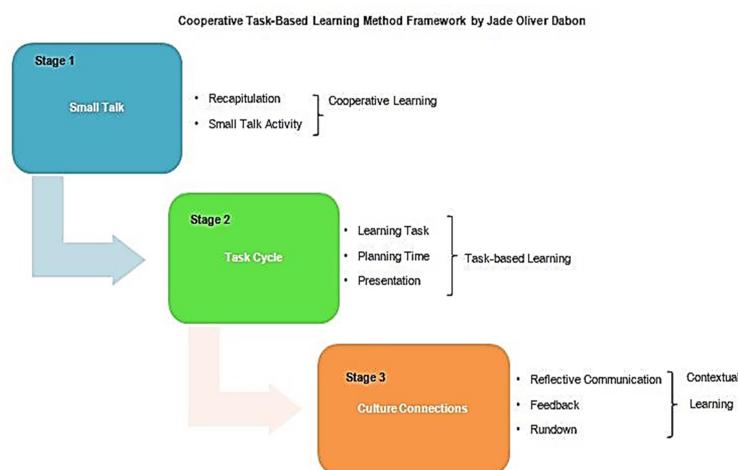


Figure 1 CTBL Method's Final Structural Framework

According to Mr. Nicfranzdelos Reyes, an instructor, at the very beginning of the implementation, the students from the reliability and experimental group were so shy and hesitant to speak. However, when the final draft was implemented, the students have progressively displayed improvement in their speaking skills and self-esteem, to the extent that they volunteer to speak in communicative activities.

Ms. April Joy Amparo, an instructor, has stated that the method has a great impact on the students' language learning because the students become responsible and cooperative learners. The method promotes a positive attitude towards English language learning. She had observed that when the students are appreciated and given corresponding points on their output, the self-confidence of the

learners' rises. She also had emphasized that constant practice can lead to better English speaking skills. In support of Ms. Amparo's statement of emphasis on oral production practice, Stern (1992) had stated that the practice on speaking has essential effects on the establishment of a social and affective atmosphere which avoids aggressiveness, and unnecessary behaviors in the classroom.

Mr. James M. Canete, an evaluator, has stated that at the very start, the individual reporting has posted a great challenge for students because they were shy to speak in front of their classmates. But, in the latter part, the students' speaking skills have improved significantly. He observed that the CTBL method is engaging and fun. It breaks the barriers of affective filters and creates meaningful learning experiences. He also claimed that the method works well with EFL/SL students.

This lesson plan structure is aided by three methods of language learning, namely, Cooperative Learning, Task-based Learning, and Contextual Learning. This structure is a product of an eclectic method called the Cooperative Task-Based Learning Method. It has five parts: objectives, subject matter, procedure, evaluation, and assignment. In the procedure section, there are three stages: Small Talk, Task Cycle and Culture Connections. In every stage, there are corresponding sub-stages to be followed.

The researcher used the TBLA as its main assessment tool for measuring the students' communicative performance and competence. The last part of this lesson plan structure is the assignment. The giving of assessments is one of the most ignored parts of the lesson as most of the teachers forget to include it in their lesson plans. Assignments are tools for monitoring learning outside the classroom.

For the second question of the study, how effective is CTBL, a combined method, in developing the students' English speaking skills. The method was tested on its effectiveness in developing the English speaking skills of the students. The effectiveness was measured in two ways: CTBL method lessons implementation and pre-test and post-test.

The participants were divided into six cooperative base groups. Each group was given enough time to prepare themselves in formulating and practicing their presentation. The evaluators of the students' performance are, Ms. Kachaporn Suriyachai, Ms. Orrawanya Wutthi, and Ms. Sirawan Siangboon. The evaluators were categorized as strict, medium and yielding. The scores of all three evaluators for each session were

calculated for the sum and average. The average and CEFR levels of each student are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 The Average and CEFR Level of Pre-test and Post-test

Students	Pre-test		Post-test		English Speaking Skills
	Rubric	Level	Rubric	Level	
Group 1					
No. 2.	2.1	A2	3.3	B1	Improved
No. 30	1.9	A1	2.9	A2	Improved
No. 32	1.9	A1	3.4	B1	Improved
No. 7.	1.6	A1	3.6	B1	Improved
No. 28	2.1	A2	2.9	A2	Improved*
No. 18	1.9	A1	2.8	A2	Improved
Group 2					
No. 8	1.7	A1	2.6	A2	Improved
No. 19	1.6	A1	2.7	A2	Improved
No. 16	1.9	A1	2.5	A2	Improved
Group 3					
No. 4	1.9	A1	2.7	A2	Improved
No. 35	2.2	A2	3.0	B1	Improved
No. 24	2.1	A2	3.4	B1	Improved
No. 36	2.3	A2	2.9	A2	Improved*
No. 29	2.3	A2	3.4	B1	Improved
No. 10	2.1	A2	3.2	B1	Improved
Group 4					
No. 12	2.1	A2	3.0	B1	Improved
No. 15	2.2	A2	3.5	B1	Improved
No. 17	1.7	A1	3.3	B1	Improved
No. 31	1.9	A1	3.4	B1	Improved
Group 5					
No. 11	2.1	A2	3.4	B1	Improved
No. 13	2.1	A2	3.2	B1	Improved
No. 20	2.2	A2	3.1	B1	Improved
No. 3	2.0	A2	3.2	B1	Improved
No. 22	1.7	A1	2.8	A2	Improved
No. 27	1.5	A1	2.7	A2	Improved

Table 1 The Average and CEFR Level of Pre-test and Post-test (cont.)

Students	Pre-test		Post-test		English Speaking Skills
	Rubric	Level	Rubric	Level	
Group 6					
No. 34	2.0	A2	3.1	B1	Improved
No. 6	2.0	A2	3.3	B1	Improved
No. 25	2.1	A2	3.1	B1	Improved
No. 33	1.7	A1	3.3	B1	Improved
No. 5	1.7	A1	3.1	B1	Improved
No. 26	2.3	A2	3.2	B1	Improved

Remark *Slightly improved

In Table 1, it can be seen that all of the participants have shown considerable improvement in their speaking skills. The word 'Improved' in the table means that there was a change of behavior and English speaking skills of the students. The majority of the participants have moved up from an A to B Scale of CEFR Level. The original number of participants of thirty-six went down to thirty-one because one of the ex-participants did not have a pre-test and the other four were absent during the post-test.

In the beginning, there were fourteen A1 language users and seventeen A2 language users. Six of A1 level students had stepped up to A2 with a 19% increase in number and eight of them made to B1 level with 26% in number. Whereas, two of A2 level students (No. 28 and 36) remained at A2 (7%) with an improvement of 0.7 and 0.6 respectively. The student no. 28 got a slight improvement in his speaking skills because during the post-test he was shy to speak with the interviewers. However, during lesson 14 he got 3.3 score which is higher than his post-test scores, 2.9 points. The student preferred to speak with his group mates during presentations than talking individually in front of the class. The student no. 36 had three absences during the lesson implementation, lessons 5, 6 and 12. These absences had affected the trend of the students' speaking skills that is why she got a slight improvement during the post-test. However, fifteen of the participants moved up to the B1 level with a 48% increase in number. Consequently, thirty-one participants or 100% of the population improved their skills in English speaking. It can also be observed that there was a 74% increase from basic language users to independent language users. This means that the participants can

speak about common matters that can be encountered at school, workplace, leisure and more. They can speak the language when they travel or visit another place where English is used. They can elicit easily connected text that pertains to personal interest. They can speak and provide explanations, opinions, opinions ambitions, and events that talk about plans. They can also communicate with other people by using simple structured sentences about family backgrounds and the environment.

It can also be observed that all base groups reached independent language speaking skills, except group 2. Group 2 had the fewest members. Their group mates were removed because they were absent during the post-test. This situation made their class standing weak as there were only three of them in the group.

Independent Sample T-Test on Pre-test and Post-test

The pre-test and post-test questions used in this study are comparable as both tasks are instructive. The pre-test was to create a poster advertisement of a new invention, whereas, the post-test was to make an own new recipe. In the pre-test, the students were asked to list some special features of their invention on the poster and make separate instructions on how to operate it. On the other hand, during the post-test, the students were asked to make their own new recipe with instructions on how to cook their favorite dish and record it in a video camera. Here, the students gave instructions on how to cook their favorite food. Therefore, both tests are compatible and comparable in producing instructions on how to do something.

Pre-test

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics on Pre-test

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-test	31	1.50	2.30	1.9462	.22442

Based on Table 2, all of the participants during the pre-test are basic language users with the minimum mean of 1.50 which is at the level of breakthrough basic users and a few way stage basic users levels with a mean of 2.30. That is to say, the whole class is a homogeneous group with a basic level.

Table 3 Pre-test – Group Statistics

Basic Users	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Breakthrough	14	1.7571	.13986	.03738
Waystage	17	2.1353	.09963	.02416

In Table 3, after the pre-test was administered, the participants were categorically labeled as breakthrough and way stage basic users. The Majority of the basic users are at way stage or A2 level which means that the students can communicate on the topics about the simple daily routine and can handle short exchanges, but cannot understand enough on a free flow of conversation. The breakthrough level can interact with simple phrases and sentences in which the other speaker can provide repetition and rephrasing of speech when the conversation is initiated. The average skill level of combined breakthrough and way stage users is 1.9462.

Table 4 Pre-test - Independent Sample T-Test Analysis

	Levene's Test for				t-test for Equality of Means							
	Equality of											
	Variances				F	Sig.	T	df	Sig	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence
									(2-tailed)	Difference	Difference	Interval of the
												Difference
												Lower
												Upper
Equal variances assumed	4.176	.050	-8.779	29	.000					-.37815	.04308	-.46625
Equal variances not assumed			-8.496	22.888	.000					-.37815	.04451	-.47025
												-.28605

Based on these results, it is safe to say that there were statistically significant differences in levels of the basic user levels (breakthrough and way stage) at 0.01 level. However, it is still a homogeneous group as all groups are at the basic level.

Post-test

Table 5 Post-test – Group Statistics

Speaking Abilities	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Basic Users	10	2.7500	.13540	.04282
Independent Users	21	3.2619	.16272	.03551

Based on these results, the two-thirds of the basic users or 21 out of 31 participants reached the level of independent users and other participants also improved with 2.7500 mean with a standard deviation of 0.13540. The average improvement of the participants in the post-test is 3.00595, which means that the post-test skill level is one scale higher than their pre-test skill level.

Table 6 Post-test - Independent Sample T-Test Analysis

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.654	.425	-8.609	29	.000	-.51190	.05946	-.63361	-.39030
Equal variances not assumed			-9.203	21.137	.000	-.51190	.05562	-.62754	-.39627

As it is shown in the table above, there were significant differences between the mean scores of basic users and independent users. The students enjoy heterogeneous variances on the post-test of speaking skills as all of them improved their skills throughout the process of language learning and acquisition.

Paired T-Test Analysis on Pre-test and Post-test

Table 7 Paired T-Test Analysis on Pre-test and Post-test

Test	N	Mean	Std.	Std.		df	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
				Deviation	Error Mean			
Pre-test	31	1.9645	0.22442	0.04031		30	-20.390**	0.000
Post-test	31	3.0095	0.28692	0.05153				

Remark $p < 0.01$

Based on these results, the estimated t value (-29.390) is statistically significant at the 0.01 level. It can be concluded that there were statistically significant differences between the mean scores on the pre-test and post-test in the overall speaking skills of the students. Therefore, the CTBL method is effective in delivering the students' development or improvement of their English speaking skills.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the pre-test and post-test, the CTBL method is proven as an effectual method in developing and improving the speaking skills of the seventh grade class nine SMAT students at Phitsanulok Pittayakom school. At first, the participants were A1 and A2 level language speakers, however, after 51 sessions, all of them improved to A2 and B1 levels. The method also helped the students to develop their self-esteem, team-work skills, and personal accountability in learning the English language. The participants had shared more of their experiences during culture connections. This implies that the learning and acquisition of the English speaking skills must be cooperative, culture connected and promotes autonomy learning, as well as, critical and analytical thinking skills. This also indicates that focusing on meaning rather than the form of the target language encourages the students to express more their ideas and experiences.

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