

The Effect of Using Literature Circle Activities on English-Speaking Skills and Critical Thinking Skills of EFL Learners

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Received: May 16, 2023

Accepted: June 12, 2023

Online Published: June 14, 2023

doi: 10.5539/elt.v16n7p33

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v16n7p33>

Abstract

This study aims to investigate the effect of using the literature circle activities on EFL learners' CEFR B2 English-speaking skills and development of critical thinking skills. The study design employed a single-group repeated-measure approach, which included three repeated experimental tests, as well as pretest and posttest data for both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The independent variable in this study was the literature circle activities based on Reader Response theory, while the dependent variables were the English-speaking skills and critical thinking ability of the participants. To assess the participants' English-speaking skills, descriptive statistics were employed, and the data were collected using CEFR B2 English-speaking skill tests. Critical thinking ability was evaluated through content analysis of the participants' responses. The research instruments utilized in this study included literature circle activities lesson plans, the CEFR B2 English-speaking skill test, the critical thinking skill test, and interviews conducted with the participants. A total of 9 upper secondary EFL students were selected for the study using purposive sampling and classified into three groups based on their English proficiency levels: low, medium, and high. The findings revealed that the students demonstrated improvement in their English-speaking abilities, reaching the CEFR B2 level as evidenced by the pretest and post-test results. Furthermore, their English-speaking skills exhibited progressive enhancement during the three-unit tests that followed their engagement in the literature circle activities. Moreover, the results from the critical thinking skill test indicated that the students had developed critical thinking skills after participating in the literature circle activities. Content analysis of their writing responses demonstrated a gradual increase in their ability to reason and think critically following their involvement in the literature circle activities.

Keywords: literature circle activities, EFL students, CEFR, English-speaking skill, critical thinking skill

1. Introduction

The English language holds significant importance for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, as proficiency in English skills greatly impacts their educational and professional advancement (Choi, 2008; Office of the Thailand Education Council, 2017). However, EFL learners often face challenges in developing English-speaking skills (ESS). Issues such as vocabulary, pronunciation, confidence, and logical expression pose difficulties for them (Kongsontana, 2014; Maskhao, 2002; Siritanarath, 2007). The Education First report (2020) and EFL research have emphasized the need for improvement in ESS within English language instruction (Songchat, 2016; Panyajirawut, 2009). Recognizing these challenges, the Office of the Basic Education Commission of Thailand has expressed concern and made a commitment to implement the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2001) in the country's education strategy (2019) to enhance EFL learners' English abilities. The CEFR provides a comprehensive framework that describes what language learners need to learn, do, and use for effective communication, along with the knowledge and skills they should develop (CEFR, 2001). It defines proficiency levels that allow for the evaluation of learners' progress at each stage of learning and throughout their lives. These levels include Basic user (A1, A2), Independent user (B1, B2), and Proficient user (C1, C2). In this study, CEFR B2 serves as the framework for improving EFL learners' English-speaking skills in five key areas: vocabulary, accuracy, pronunciation, coherence, and interaction. The aim is to enhance their proficiency in these areas and help them reach the B2 level. By focusing on these aspects, the study seeks to address the challenges EFL learners face in developing their ESS.

However, in addition to English-speaking skills, critical thinking skills are also crucial for EFL learners in the 21st century. The ability to think critically is considered essential for global citizenship education (GCE) and

education for sustainable development (ESD) (UNESCO, 2017). Critical thinking is particularly emphasized in cognitive learning contexts, where students are expected to acquire knowledge relevant to the twenty-first century (UNESCO, 2017). The literature circle activities (LC), introduced by Daniels (2002), promotes the use of literary texts as educational resources, and is recognized as an activity that enhances both English-speaking and critical thinking skills in the cognitive learning domain (UNESCO, 2017). LC activities have facilitated the development of EFL learners' critical thinking skills and thought processes, in addition to their overall language proficiency, as it follows the format of a book club (Daniels, 2002; Shelton-Strong, 2012). The advantages of the LC activities extend to all English skills, including speaking and critical thinking. Through responding to their peers' perspectives and sharing their own views, students can practice their speaking skills and engage in critical thinking during LC activities (Elhess and Egbert, 2015; Kaowiwattanakul, 2020; Larson, 2008). Participants have the opportunity to express their personal viewpoints on various aspects of the topic or literature being discussed. This process of exchanging, analyzing, and evaluating ideas strengthens higher-order thinking skills and fosters the practice and development of critical thinking (Bloom, 1956; Schlick Noe and Johnson, 1999). Critical thinking tasks can also be utilized as assessment tools to evaluate language production and comprehension in middle school and high school students (Daniels, 2002; Nippold, 2014; Shelton-Strong, 2012; Steinecke, 2004).

Hence, the LC activities are employed in the current study to enhance the English-speaking and critical thinking abilities of EFL learners who struggle with English-speaking skills (Education First, 2020). The researcher finds that the use of LC activities can effectively strengthen both English-speaking and critical thinking skills in EFL students, aligning with the demands of the 21st century in ASEAN and other countries (Burns, 1998; Daniels, 2002; Kaowiwattanakul, 2020; Larson, 2008; Shelton-Strong, 2012; UNESCO, 2017). However, despite claims of its potential to improve both English-speaking and critical thinking abilities, there is limited research on the LC activities within the field of EFL research. Therefore, this study implements the LC activities and investigates its impact on the enhancement of EFL learners' critical thinking and English-speaking abilities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Literature Circle Activities

The literature circle activities (LC) are rooted in the Reader Response theory (RR), which was initially proposed by Louise Rosenblatt (1978). The Reader Response theory originated in the realm of literary criticism and challenges both the author's intended meaning within the text and the conventional interpretation of the text itself, emphasizing the significant role of the reader's comprehension and interpretation (Iser, 1974, 1978). Similarly, Rosenblatt (1978) argued that literature exposes readers to aesthetic knowledge by stimulating reflection on diverse cultures, prior knowledge, and personal experiences during the reading process. As a result, the LC activities (LC) were developed to assist readers in enhancing their language skills and thinking abilities. By incorporating LC activities within the framework of the Reader Response theory, English language learners can benefit across all language skills, with a specific emphasis on speaking skills (Daniels, 2002; Kaowiwattanakul, 2020; Zhang, 2009).

The LC is an activity where participants come together to discuss and analyze books that each member has read, with a specific focus on selected texts (Daniels, 2002). This activity involves five distinct roles: Discussion leader, Summarizer, Connector, Word master, Passage person, and Artistic adventurer. The primary aim of the LC activities in this study is to enhance students' language skills, particularly their speaking skills. Engaging in LCs provides college students with valuable opportunities for social interaction and communication on important topics that are relevant to them (Daniels, 2002; Shelton-Strong, 2012; Steinecke, 2004). Through meaningful oral discussions that occur within LCs, students have increased chances to practice and improve their oral skills, thus contributing to the development of their speaking proficiency (Echevarria, Vogt, and Short, 2008; Nagy and Townsend, 2012; Souvenir, 1997). Additionally, the LC supports learning approaches that involve visualization, making connections, asking questions, reasoning, and analysis. As a result, the LC activities effectively promote communication and encourage analytical thinking processes (Daniels, 2002; Elhess, & Egbert, 2015; Kaowiwattanakul, 2020).

Hence, the LC activities explored in this study offer a range of benefits for both learners and teachers. These advantages can be classified into three primary dimensions, focusing on language enhancement, specifically in terms of comprehension and English-speaking abilities, as well as the development of twenty-first-century skills such as critical thinking, and instructional and learning assessment. These advantages associated with LCs, as identified in this study, address a research gap, and highlight the potential of LC activities in language learning and skills development. By incorporating LCs into EFL learners' practices, teachers can create engaging and

meaningful learning experiences that promote learners' language proficiency, critical thinking, and the acquisition of essential twenty-first-century skills (Briggs, 2010; Daniels & Steineke, 2004; McElvain, 2010; UNESCO, 2017; Wilfong, 2009).

2.2 Literature in CEFR B2 (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages Learning, Teaching, and Assessment)

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001) emphasizes the use of literature to enhance English language proficiency. According to the framework, literature provides an aesthetic approach to teaching language, encompassing activities such as creating, receiving, and performing literary materials. This aesthetic use of language, whether spoken or written, is accessible and collaborative for learners. Additionally, literature serves instructional functions beyond the purely aesthetic, encompassing intellectual, moral, emotional, linguistic, and cultural aspects. The Council of Europe recognizes literature as a valuable common resource that preserves and develops the European cultural legacy (CEFR, 2012, p. 56).

Furthermore, the qualitative aspects of CEFR B2 spoken language proficiency assess the quality of individual language use in English speaking. These aspects include vocabulary, accuracy, fluency, interaction, and coherence, which are used to evaluate learners' speaking abilities at the B2 level. Table 1 provides a summary of these five aspects of B2 CEFR spoken language proficiency (CEFR, 2012, p. 28).

Table 1. Qualitative Aspects of Spoken Language Use in CEFR B2

Qualitative aspects of spoken language use in CEFR B2	
Vocabulary	Has a sufficient range of language to be able to give clear descriptions, express viewpoints on most general topics, without much conspicuous searching for words, using some complex sentence forms to do so.
Accuracy	Shows a relatively high degree of grammatical control. Does not make errors which cause mis- understanding and can correct most of his/her mistakes.
Fluency	Can produce stretches of language with a fairly even tempo; although he/she can be hesitant as he/she searches for patterns and expressions. There are few noticeably long pauses.
Interaction	Can initiate discourse, take his/her turn when appropriate and end conversation when his/her needs to, though he/she may not always do this elegantly and can help the discussion along on familiar ground confirming comprehension, inviting others in, etc.
Coherence	Can use a limited number of cohesive devices to link his/her utterances into clear, coherent discourse, though there may be some 'jumpiness' in a long contribution.

2.3 Critical Thinking Skills

Critical thinking skills (CTs) involve using reasoning to justify beliefs or actions and can be applied across academic disciplines (Bloom, 1956). Critical thinkers possess both CT skills and disposition. CT skills involve providing compelling reasons to support beliefs, judgments, and actions, while CT disposition involves seeking causes, evaluating them, and adjusting beliefs and actions based on evaluation (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001; Bailin and Siegel, 2003; Kaowiwattanakul, 2012).

The Original Bloom Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956) is widely used to categorize learning objectives and test items based on the level of learning and critical thinking involved (Bissell and Lemons, 2006). The first three categories of the taxonomy are hierarchical, with basic knowledge not requiring critical thinking, understanding building upon basic knowledge but not necessitating critical thinking, and application demanding a higher level of accumulated knowledge. The last three categories represent advanced skills that involve critical thinking but do not necessarily have hierarchical levels. The effective use of these advanced skills requires knowledge and understanding of the content, so support should be provided across all levels (Bloom, 1956; Krathwoh, 2002).

Furthermore, Kaowiwattanakul (2008) explained that the development of critical thinking skills, based on the Original Bloom Taxonomy, can be applied to the study of literature across all six levels: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. These levels illustrate the progression of critical thinking skills in literary study. Table 2 provides further details regarding the application of critical thinking skills in each level.

Table 2. Level of Critical Thinking Skills Used in Literary Study (Kaowiwattanakul, 2008)

Level of critical thinking skills	Descriptions
Knowledge	Identify the story elements: plot, characters, setting.
Comprehension	Determine literal meaning of the text.
Application	Make connections between the story's message and personal experiences.
Analysis	Identify an important message/ theme/ main idea of a story. Infer the author's purpose and point of view. Recognize techniques used in making/ writing the text.
Evaluation	Make a decision in a particular situation based on a criterion. Judge the validity of an interpretation or statement based on a criterion.
Synthesis	Produce or create work by relating knowledge from several areas.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study utilized a single-group repeated-measure research design, as outlined by Mackey and Gass (2005). The independent variables in this study consisted of literature circle activities based on Reader Response theory. The dependent variables focused on the students' English-speaking skills and critical thinking skills. To assess English-speaking skills, a quantitative data collection approach was employed through an English-speaking test. Descriptive statistics, encompassing arithmetic mean (\bar{x}), median (Mdn), mode (Mo), range (R), and standard deviation (S.D), were utilized for this data analysis (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

In order to evaluate critical thinking skills, a qualitative data collection method was employed using a critical thinking test. The summative content analysis was utilized for data analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mackey & Gass, 2005). The tests for both English-speaking skills and critical thinking skills were administered during the Pre-test, Posttest (T1 and T4), as well as the three-unit tests (U1, U2, and U3) that followed each treatment (X1, X2, and X3) (adapted from Ueai-Chimplee, 2007). Furthermore, an attitude interview was conducted with the participants to collect qualitative data, which was then analyzed using summative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mackey & Gass, 2005). The research design is visually represented in Figure 1.

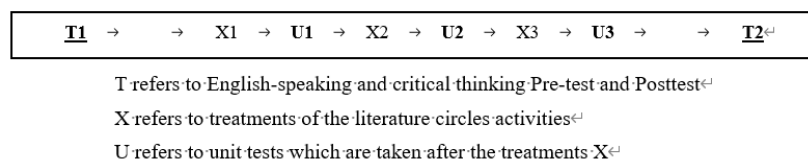


Figure 1. Research design

3.2 Participants

The participants in this study were EFL students studying at the upper secondary level. They were systematically categorized into three groups based on their English proficiency level: low, medium, and high, determined by their previous English subject scores. To select the participants, a systematic sampling method was employed from a classroom of 30 students (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The participants underwent different sets of questions for each CEFR B2 English-speaking test and critical thinking skills test. Before starting the lesson plans, the participants took a pretest. In total, there were nine participants.

3.3 Research Instruments

The four research instruments used in the present study included:

3.3.1 Lesson Plans of Literature Circles Activities

The researcher developed a four-week lesson plan based on literature circle activities, integrating the CEFR B2 English-speaking instruction (CEFR, 2001) and literature circle activities (Daniels, 2002; Shelton-Strong, 2012) derived from Reader Response theory (Iser, 1974; Rosenblatt, 1978). The language level of the lesson plans was

assessed to ensure suitability for evaluating the CEFR B2 level. The lesson plans included the use of six literary texts: "Home" by Gwendolyn Brooks for the pretest and posttest, "Cousin Tribulation's Story" by Louisa May Alcott for unit test 1, "The Aged Mother" by Matsuo Basho for unit test 2, and "The Kiss" by Kate Chopin for unit test 3.

(1) Building Schema Knowledge Stage

During the "Building Schema Knowledge" stage, the teacher provides students with background information on the literary texts and reviews the key elements such as words, plot, characters, setting, and theme based on the CEFR B2 level. This stage serves as preparation, allowing students to identify and acknowledge their existing knowledge of literary study. Furthermore, English vocabulary, particularly CEFR B2 vocabulary, is reinforced to enhance students' vocabulary repertoire. The teacher can also pose questions to stimulate students' thinking and engagement with the literary texts during this stage.

(2) Engaging in Literary Texts Stage

During the "Engaging in Literary Texts" stage, students were assigned one literary text per lesson plan to read individually. The purpose of this stage was for students to comprehend the literal meaning of the text and familiarize themselves with the vocabulary through self-reading. Following their individual reading, students formed groups to discuss and share their ideas about the literary text. They also had the opportunity to choose their own Literature Circle (LC) roles. These roles, including Discussion leader, Summarizer, Connector, Word master, Passage person, and Artistic adventurer (Daniels, 2002; Shelton-Strong, 2012), encompassed different tasks and responsibilities within the group discussions. However, it should be noted that the LC roles were rotated, and students were not allowed to choose the same role in each lesson plan and literature. This rotation ensured that students had the opportunity to experience different roles and responsibilities throughout the course of the study.

(3) Reflexing Stage

In the "Reflecting" stage, there are two main parts: the discussing part and the presenting part. References to Daniels (2002), Kaowiwattanakul (2008), and Shelton-Strong (2012) support the use of these two parts in the reflecting stage depicted in Figure 2. In the discussing part, students engage in group discussions about the literary texts, reflecting on and sharing their viewpoints with their group members while using English as the medium of communication. They also fulfill their assigned LCs tasks during these discussions. This part of the stage provides an opportunity for students to practice their English-speaking skills and critical thinking abilities by addressing questions related to the literary texts. In the presenting part, students create presentations based on the literature and share their viewpoints with the entire class. This allows them to express their ideas and perspectives in a formal setting, drawing upon their understanding and analysis of the literary texts. The presentations serve as a platform for students to showcase their insights and engage in further discussions with their peers.

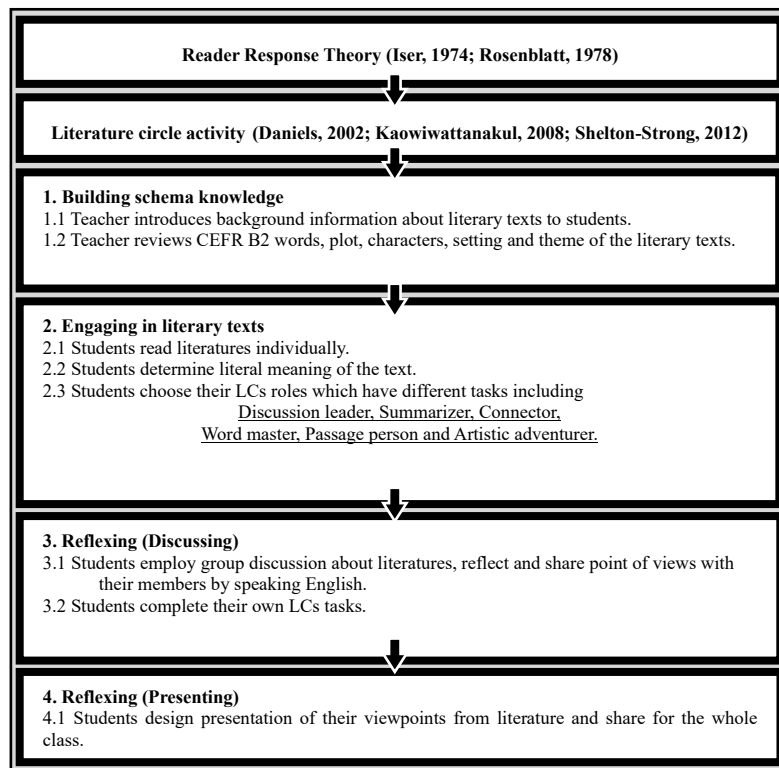


Figure 2. Stages in Literature circle activities (Daniels, 2002; Kaowiwattanakul, 2008; Shelton-Strong, 2012)

3.3.2 CEFR B2 English-speaking Skills Test

The CEFR B2 English-speaking skills tests were administered to the nine participants in various stages of the research, including the pre-test, post-test, and unit tests. The questions for these speaking tests were designed by consideration of the five literary texts that the students had studied. The framework was utilized to evaluate the speaking skills tests and was aligned with the CEFR B2 qualitative aspects of spoken language use in the common reference level. These qualitative aspects encompass five key areas: vocabulary, accuracy, fluency, interaction, and coherence (CEFR, 2001).

3.3.3 Critical Thinking Test

The critical thinking skill test in this study consists of individual short-response tasks that require participants to write in English. To assess critical thinking skills, the research applies the Original Bloom Taxonomy (1956) framework, which encompasses various levels of thinking from the simplest to the most complex. These levels include remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing, adapted from the work of Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), Bloom (1956), and Kaowiwattanakul (2008).

3.3.4 Students Interview

The objectives of the interview were twofold: 1. To investigate students' attitudes towards the use of literature circles activities, and 2. To explore students' attitudes towards the development of CEFR B2 English-speaking skills and critical thinking skills. The interview was conducted in a semi-structured interview and comprised of three parts: 1. Overall attitude towards using literature circles activities, 2. Attitude towards CEFR B2 English-speaking skills development, and 3. Attitude towards critical thinking skills development. It is noteworthy that the research instruments used in the study were validated by three experts who have extensive experience in each of the research instruments. The inter-rater agreement (IOC) result indicated a value of 0.82, with the range ranging from 0.57 to 1.0. Prior to implementing the research instruments, ethical approval was obtained from the University of Phayao, Thailand, with the approval number UP-HEC 7326.02/0023.

3.4 Research Procedures

There are three main stages in the literature circles (LCs) activity: Building Schema Knowledge, Engaging in Literary Texts and Reflexing stages. In order to assess the participants' CEFR B2 English-speaking skills, they completed a Pre-test, posttest, and unit tests. To evaluate their critical thinking skills, an individual test consisting of written short responses was administered. Additionally, the participants were required to take three-unit tests for examining their development in both CEFR B2 English-speaking skills and critical thinking skills. The questions used in the CEFR B2 English-speaking tests and critical thinking skills tests were the same. These questions were generated based on the critical thinking framework adapted from Anderson & Krathwohl (2001), Bloom (1956), and Kaowiwattanakul (2008). The participants were tested using these questions in each test to assess their English-speaking and critical thinking abilities.

4. Results

4.1 Effects of Using Literature Circle Activities on CEFR B2 English-Speaking Skills

When examining the results of the Pretest and posttest, it was evident that the EFL students demonstrated improvement in their English-speaking skills across all five areas as a result of participating in the LCs activity. The three Unit Tests also indicated that the students had developed their skills in these five aspects.

The assessment of the CEFR B2 English-speaking skills, as shown in Table 3, involved considering the overall scores. The total score was 45, which encompassed the five aspects: vocabulary (9 scores), accuracy (9 scores), pronunciation (9 scores), coherence (9 scores), and interaction (9 scores). Descriptive statistics were used to compare the mean scores of the pretest, three-unit tests, and post-test. The participants exhibited a higher mean CEFR B2 speaking quality score in the post-test ($\bar{x} = 37.44$) compared to the pretest ($\bar{x} = 16.83$). Additionally, when comparing the maximum and minimum scores between the pretest and post-test, it was observed that the post-test's minimum score (Min = 33.5) was higher than the pretest's maximum score (Max = 20.5). Furthermore, after implementing the literature circle activities, the participants' overall results in the CEFR B2 English-speaking skill test showed improvement in each unit test. Unit test 1 had a mean score of $\bar{x} = 26.39$, unit test 2 had $\bar{x} = 30.56$, and unit test 3 had $\bar{x} = 34.44$. These results indicate that the participants experienced enhancements in their speaking abilities within the CEFR B2 English-speaking level. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the literature circle activities had a positive influence on the participants' speaking aspects within the CEFR B2 English-speaking skills, as indicated in Table 3.

Table 3. Overall Quality Result of CEFR B2 English-Speaking Skill

English-speaking test (Total converted score = 45 points)	N	Mean Scores (\bar{x})	S.D.	Median or Mdn	Min	Max	Range or R	Mode or Mo
Pretest	45	16.83	1.75	16.5	15	20.5	5.5	3
Unit Test 1	45	26.39	3.52	26	22	32	10	5
Unit Test 2	45	30.56	1.81	30.5	28	33.5	5.5	5.5
Unit Test 3	45	34.44	1.47	35	31.5	36	4.5	6.5
Posttest	45	37.44	2.83	37.5	33.5	41	7.5	7.5

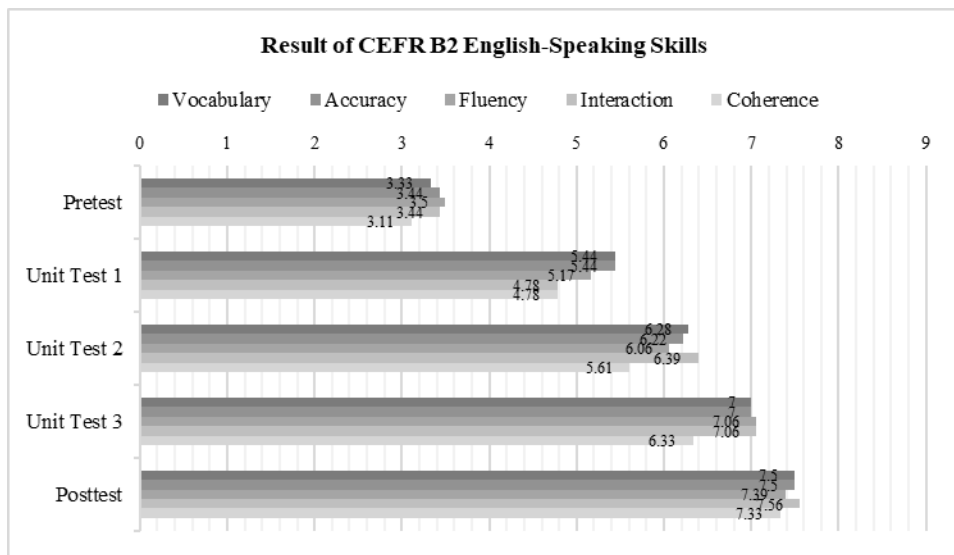


Figure 3. Result of CEFR B2 English-Speaking Skills

4.2 Effects of Using Literature Circle Activities on Critical Thinking Skills

To develop critical thinking skills, the researcher utilized the judging method, which involved having students provide written short answers to critical thinking questions in the pre-test, post-test, and three-unit tests. The responses were then analyzed using the 6-level critical thinking framework outlined in Table 2. Upon examining the pretest results, it became apparent that the majority of students struggled to evaluate the validity of an interpretation or statement based on a criterion from the literature. It is noteworthy that this difficulty was not related to the level of evaluation. The analysis revealed that the pretest answers predominantly aligned with the application level rather than the evaluation level. In other words, students were able to establish connections between the message conveyed in the story and their personal experiences. This is exemplified by the response of one student.

Question: What if you must live in a strange new place? How do you handle yourselves?

Answer: In my opinion, I'll try fixing it myself first. But if not, then I will consult the neighbors to ask for help from close people. (Student No. 07)

Furthermore, during the three-unit assessments, it was observed that some students demonstrated improvement in their thinking abilities and provided more reasonable explanations compared to the pretest. However, there were still a number of students who struggled to achieve the desired level of evaluation. This level required them to critically assess the validity of an interpretation or assertion based on a criterion derived from the literature. Upon analysis, it was evident that these students' responses primarily aligned with the application level rather than the evaluation level. In other words, they were able to establish connections between the message of the story and their personal experiences. However, they encountered difficulty in evaluating the validity of an interpretation or assertion based on specific criteria within the context of the three-unit tests. Here is an example of such a response.

Question: Many people only look out for themselves and never think about helping others. What do you think of this attitude?

Answer: I think the attitude is very bad. Because being selfish makes it difficult to reach people and if something happens, selfish people have no one to help. (Student No. 01)

The findings from the post-test demonstrated a noticeable improvement in students' critical thinking skills. They were able to effectively judge the validity of interpretations or statements by applying relevant criteria from the literature. This improvement was evident in their responses, which aligned with the evaluation level, indicating their ability to critically analyze and assess information. Furthermore, students were able to provide clear and well-supported explanations to justify their decisions, surpassing their performance in both the pretest and unit tests. These results provide strong evidence that students experienced growth in their critical thinking skills,

specifically in the area of evaluation, as a direct result of their participation in the literature circle activities. Here is an example to illustrate this improvement:

Question: What if you must live in a strange new place? How do you handle yourselves?

Answer: I reckon that if living in a new place, to kick off, I have to adapt a lot. But for me, adjusting is difficult. The best thing to do to deal with problems is to accept and look at the world in a positive way, think of yourself a lot and the mind will be better accepting new places and finally settled on it or find something to replace what the old house has, so that you won't be too attached and miss the same place. In the nutshell, adjusting our thoughts, emotions, and actions will allow us to get used to the new places we have to live in. Even it takes time, but when we can do it, we will be happy with it. (Student No. 09)

In summary, the results obtained during the pre-test indicated that students lacked the ability to make informed decisions in specific situations and critically evaluate issues based on relevant criteria and evidence from the literature. However, following their engagement in the literature circle activities, students demonstrated a significant improvement in their critical thinking skills, particularly in the post-test. They were able to make more critical judgments that aligned with the evaluation level of Bloom's Taxonomy framework (1956). This suggests that the literature circle activities effectively facilitated the development of students' evaluating skills. To further enhance critical thinking development, it is recommended to incorporate the literature circle activities into instructional procedures on a regular basis. By doing so, students can continually strengthen their critical thinking abilities based on the principles outlined in Bloom's Taxonomy framework (Daniels, 2002; Kaowiwattanukul, 2008; Shelton-Strong, 2012).

5. Discussion

5.1 Effects of Using Literature Circle Activities on CEFR B2 English-Speaking Skills

According to the results of the mean scores of the CEFR B2 English-speaking skill test, it can be observed that the literature circle activities had a positive impact on the participants' CEFR B2 English-speaking skills. This finding is consistent with the research conducted by Kaowiwattanukul (2020), Shelton-Strong (2012), Worawong (2019), and Willcox-Ficzere (2018). By engaging in literature circles, the participants had the opportunity to exchange thoughts and opinions with their peers, allowing them to practice and improve their speaking abilities. Specifically, the participants showed improvement in all five aspects of spoken language proficiency outlined in the CEFR (2001), namely vocabulary, accuracy, fluency, interaction, and coherence.

In terms of vocabulary, learners at the CEFR B2 level are expected to possess a sufficient range of language to provide clear descriptions and express viewpoints on general topics without significant difficulty in finding appropriate words. The results demonstrated that the participants gradually enhanced their vocabulary skills at the CEFR B2 level. Their overall scores showed a steady improvement throughout the course, with the Pretest ($\bar{x} = 3.44$), Unit test 1 ($\bar{x} = 5.44$), Unit test 2 ($\bar{x} = 6.22$), Unit test 3 ($\bar{x} = 7$), and Posttest ($\bar{x} = 7.5$). These findings suggest that the EFL learners were able to develop their vocabulary competency skills and utilize vocabulary resources effectively to engage in discussions on various topics, thus achieving the CEFR B2 level in terms of English-speaking aspects (CEFR, 2001).

In CEFR B2, accuracy is defined as learners demonstrating a relatively high level of grammatical control, avoiding errors that could lead to miscommunication, and being able to correct most mistakes (CEFR, 2001). The findings of the participants indicated a continuous improvement in their accuracy competency skills at the CEFR B2 level. Their overall scores showed an increase in each assessment, including the Pretest ($\bar{x} = 3.44$), Unit test 1 ($\bar{x} = 5.44$), Unit test 2 ($\bar{x} = 6.22$), Unit test 3 ($\bar{x} = 7$), and Posttest ($\bar{x} = 7.5$). These results suggest that the participants enhanced their accuracy skills and were able to use grammatical accuracy to answer questions in the posttest aligned with the CEFR B2 level of English-speaking abilities after engaging in literature circles (CEFR, 2001).

Regarding fluency, the findings revealed that the participants were able to improve their fluency competency skills at the CEFR B2 level. Their overall scores showed improvement in each lesson, including the Pretest ($\bar{x} = 3.5$), Unit test 1 ($\bar{x} = 5.17$), Unit test 2 ($\bar{x} = 6.06$), Unit test 3 ($\bar{x} = 7.06$), and Posttest ($\bar{x} = 7.39$). Therefore, the results indicated that they enhanced their fluency skills and could produce stretches of language with a consistent tempo, although some hesitation and occasional pauses may be observed as they searched for patterns and expressions. The findings aligned with the fluency aspects outlined in the CEFR B2 level of English-speaking characteristics (CEFR, 2001).

In the CEFR B2 level, interaction is described as learners who can confidently engage in and complete simple face-to-face conversations on familiar topics they have studied, and they can contribute to the discussion to

ensure understanding (CEFR, 2001). The results indicated that the participants continuously developed their interaction skills at the CEFR B2 level. Their overall scores improved in each assessment after engaging in the literature circle activities, including the Pretest ($\bar{x} = 3.44$), Unit test 1 ($\bar{x} = 4.78$), Unit test 2 ($\bar{x} = 6.39$), Unit test 3 ($\bar{x} = 7.06$), and Posttest ($\bar{x} = 7.56$), which achieved the highest rating in the four lesson plans. These results demonstrate that the students achieved the desired level of interaction proficiency outlined in the CEFR B2 English-speaking skill (CEFR, 2001). Therefore, it can be concluded that the participants successfully accomplished the interaction aspect of the CEFR B2 level.

Coherence, as defined in the CEFR B2 level, refers to students using cohesive devices to connect their utterances into coherent discourse, even though there may be some "jumpiness" or lack of smooth transitions in longer contributions (CEFR, 2001). The results showed that the participants improved their coherence competency skills at the CEFR B2 level. Their total scores increased in each lesson, including the Pretest ($\bar{x} = 3.11$), Unit test 1 ($\bar{x} = 4.78$), Unit test 2 ($\bar{x} = 5.61$), Unit test 3 ($\bar{x} = 6.33$), and Posttest ($\bar{x} = 7.33$). Therefore, the findings indicated that the literature circle activities motivated students to enhance their coherence skills, enabling them to achieve the desired level of English-speaking competency outlined in the CEFR B2 level (CEFR, 2001).

In conclusion, the quantitative results demonstrate that incorporating literature circle activities has had a positive impact on the English-speaking skills of EFL students. The reflective stage of the literature circles served as a motivating factor for students to actively participate in speaking and discussions, leading to improvements in their English-speaking abilities within the CEFR B2 framework. These findings support the advantages of utilizing literature circle activities as outlined by Daniels (2002) and Elhess and Egbert (2015), who emphasize their role in developing oral skills and fostering collaborative conversations. Moreover, the results align with the principles of Reader Response theory, which suggest that learners can gain self-awareness through reflection on their actions and experiences, and that literary texts can evoke unique perspectives and emotions (Probst, 1994).

The research findings demonstrate that the students had the chance to practice and showcase their English-speaking skills in each lesson, leading to a gradual improvement across the five aspects of CEFR B2 spoken language proficiency: vocabulary, accuracy, fluency, interaction, and coherence (CEFR, 2001). The posttest scores indicated a higher level of proficiency compared to the previous tests, indicating the students' progress throughout the three lesson plans. It is worth noting that a significant number of students were able to reach the CEFR B2 level. These results are consistent with previous studies conducted by Elhess & Egbert (2015), Kaowiwattanakul (2020), and Shelton-Strong (2012), which demonstrated that integrating Reader Response theory and literature circle activities can enhance English-speaking skills. Engaging in meaningful oral discussions within the context of literature circles provides learners with increased opportunities to practice their oral skills and ultimately develop their proficiency (Daniels, 2002; Elhess & Egbert, 2015; Souvenir, 1997). In conclusion, based on the research findings, it is evident that incorporating Reader Response theory and literature circle activities in English language classes can foster English-speaking skills and enable EFL students to engage in English conversations and express their opinions about literary works (Daniels, 2002; Hickman, 1981; Probst, 1994).

5.2 Effects of Using Literature Circle Activities on Critical Thinking Skills

The positive effects on the participants' critical thinking skills were observed in two parts: the literature circle activities teaching and the critical thinking test. The literature circle activities teaching in this study consisted of three parts: building schema knowledge, engaging with literary texts, and reflecting (Kaowiwattanakul, 2020).

In the building schema knowledge part, the participants were able to review their background knowledge to enhance their understanding of the texts. They were able to make connections between their prior knowledge and experiences to build their schema knowledge. Consequently, the participants could examine their existing knowledge to deepen their understanding of the texts and enrich their schema knowledge with personal experiences related to the literary texts. However, it is important to note that critical thinking skills were not improved during this stage as students primarily engaged in recalling and understanding, which aligns with the remembering and understanding levels of Bloom's Taxonomy (1956).

In the "engaging in the literary text" section, the roles of both the teacher and the literature circle activities contribute to improving students' critical thinking skills. These roles include the Discussion Leader, Summarizer, Connector, Word Master, Passage Person, and Artistic Adventurer (Daniels, 2002; Shelton-Strong, 2012). Each role provides a unique perspective, allowing learners to think critically about the activities related to building schema knowledge. Similarly, students are able to analyze the literary text within the classroom setting and gather important points or thoughts to contribute to the discussion (Kaowiwattanakul, 2021). The teacher plays a crucial role in observing students' discussions and guiding them to comprehend the issues and engage in

meaningful conversations related to the literary texts. The teacher's role involves stimulating and questioning students to encourage deeper critical thinking. For instance, an evaluation stage question such as "Do you agree with the statement - Every aged person should live in nursing homes? Why?" can prompt students to think critically. The teacher can continue to challenge students by posing follow-up questions and encouraging each role, led by the Discussion Leader, to delve further into the topic during the literature circle group discussions.

In the reflecting section, the participants engaged in brainstorming within their groups to gather ideas from one another. They practiced critical thinking skills through group discussions and also rotated literature circle roles. This stage can be further divided into two main parts: the discussing part and the presenting part. During the discussing part, students actively participated in group discussions about the literature, reflecting on the text and sharing their viewpoints with their fellow group members while communicating in English. They also completed their assigned literature circle tasks. This part provided them with opportunities to practice both their English-speaking skills and their critical thinking skills, as they tackled the questions and issues arising from the literary texts. At the conclusion of each lesson plan, the participants demonstrated their critical thinking skills by composing three short answers. These answers required them to apply their critical thinking abilities and express their thoughts on the texts. Through this process, students gradually improved their critical thinking skills as they progressed from one stage to another within the literature circle activities.

In these studies, researchers implemented literature circle activities as a means to enhance students' critical thinking skills, and significant improvements were observed. These findings are consistent with previous studies conducted by Karatay (2017), Kaowiwattanakul (2021), Liao (2009), and Mary Nerissa T Castro (2021), which also emphasize the positive effects of literature circle activities in promoting students' critical analysis of literary texts and enhancing their cognitive and language skills, particularly in speaking. Throughout the literature circle activities, higher-level Critical Thinking questions based on Bloom's Taxonomy were utilized at each stage of the response process. These questions required students to engage in reasoning and provide well-supported responses. The students drew critical evidence from various sources, including the literary text itself, personal experiences, prior knowledge, group discussions, and the literature circle activities. As a result, the participants demonstrated the development of their critical thinking skills, as evidenced by their performance in the Unit test. In the Pretest, it was observed that the students struggled to produce responses that reached higher-order thinking levels, such as analysis or evaluation. Instead, their writing responses primarily reflected lower-order thinking levels, focusing on remembering or the application of knowledge.

However, in the Posttest, the students' writing responses demonstrated higher-order thinking levels, including analysis or evaluation, as indicated by the results of the critical thinking tests. This suggests that the students' ability to evaluate issues and provide supportive reasons had been nurtured through their engagement with the literature circle activities, in line with the principles outlined by Bloom (1965). In conclusion, the qualitative analysis of the critical thinking tests provides compelling evidence that the literature circle activities effectively enhance the participants' critical thinking skills. Specifically, two sections within the literature circle teaching stages were found to promote critical thinking: engaging with the literary text and reflecting on the reading experience. These sections were designed in alignment with Bloom's taxonomy (1956) to facilitate the development of critical thinking skills, particularly at the Analysis, Evaluation, and Synthesis levels.

6. Conclusion

Using the CEFR as an English language framework is beneficial for enhancing EFL students' English language skills. The CEFR criterion is employed to assess participants' English-speaking skills across five aspects: vocabulary, accuracy, fluency, interaction, and coherence, all of which are crucial for the CEFR B2 level. In this study, the CEFR B2 level was applied in conjunction with literature circle activities for EFL upper secondary school students. The results of the five tests demonstrated that students were able to enhance their English-speaking skills and achieve the CEFR B2 level, particularly evident in the Unit test 3 and the Posttest. Furthermore, the results of each speaking test revealed a gradual improvement in students' English-speaking skills, indicating an increase in their speaking frequency. Notably, the Posttest showed significant improvements in vocabulary, accuracy, and interaction aspects of the CEFR B2 level. This suggests that participants were able to effectively use a wide range of vocabulary, demonstrate a high level of grammatical control, initiate, and engage in discourse, appropriately take turns in conversation, and bring conversations to a close. These findings align with the qualitative aspects of the CEFR B2 spoken language use framework (CEFR, 2012). However, while most participants showed improvement in their English-speaking skills at the CEFR B2 level, it is important to note that not all students were able to achieve the desired English-speaking capacities at this level. This indicates that factors or aspects beyond the scope of this study may have influenced their progression in English-speaking ability. Further exploration of these factors in future studies would be valuable.

Next, the conclusion regarding the development of critical thinking skills highlights the effectiveness of the literature circle activities, which consists of three stages: Building Schema Knowledge, Engaging in Literary Texts, and Reflecting (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Bloom, 1956; Kaowiwattanakul, 2008). The research findings clearly demonstrate that the utilization of the literature circle activities plays a crucial role in enhancing EFL students' critical thinking skills, particularly in their writing responses. Through content analysis, it was evident that their critical thinking abilities had improved in the posttest, as they were able to address Analysis, Evaluation, and Synthesis questions related to the literature. Their writing responses indicated their proficiency in identifying important messages, themes, or main ideas of a story and making decisions based on specific criteria. They were also capable of generating new ideas or creating work by integrating knowledge from various areas, aligning with the critical thinking framework (Bloom, 1956; Kaowiwattanakul, 2008). Furthermore, each stage of the literature circle activities integrated the top three levels of critical thinking—analysis, evaluation, and synthesis—to foster the development of EFL students' critical thinking skills. The progressive nature of the three stages, along with the incorporation of these higher-order thinking levels, played a significant role in cultivating critical thinking skills. The integration of the three stages and the top three levels of critical thinking is essential, as it allows for gradual improvement in critical thinking skills, following the principles outlined by Bloom (1956). However, it should be noted that some students were unable to reach the top three levels of Bloom's taxonomy (1956) even after engaging in the literature circle activities. Instead, they demonstrated lower-order thinking skills, such as Knowledge, Comprehension, and Application. These outcomes suggest that there may be additional factors influencing their performance, which should be considered in future studies.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the current study in investigating the development of CEFR B2 English-speaking and critical thinking skills. The first limitation relates to the varying English language proficiency levels among learners. Each student possesses different levels of English language skills, and those who score higher may already have greater proficiency, potentially impacting their ability to enhance their English-speaking skills. The second limitation pertains to the development of critical thinking in upper secondary students, who often require guidance and encouragement from instructors to shape their critical thinking responses. While students may be capable of expressing their thoughts and ideas, instructors play a vital role in stimulating their thinking by fostering an environment that encourages independent thought rather than providing direct answers. Therefore, upper secondary students may benefit from mentors or reliable resources that can inspire and stimulate their ideas and thoughts to meet the competencies of critical thinking.

In conclusion, the present study demonstrates the effectiveness of utilizing the literature circle activities to enhance EFL students' English-speaking skills and critical thinking abilities. The students were able to improve their English-speaking skills in line with the CEFR B2 framework and exhibited their critical thinking skills in writing responses on various topics within the context of the literature circle activities employed in this research. Consequently, it is recommended that English teachers consider incorporating the literature circle activities into their language classes not only to improve English-speaking abilities based on the CEFR framework but also to foster critical thinking skills in EFL students, drawing upon the principles of Bloom's taxonomy. The use of the literature circle activities to enhance English-speaking and critical thinking skills can have a significant impact on upper secondary learners, equipping them with dynamic skills necessary for educational development, global understanding, appreciation of differences and diversity, and the ability to engage in effective and responsible behavior, which are crucial in the twenty-first-century era (CEFR, 2012; UNESCO, 2017).

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the School of Liberal Arts, University of Phayao, for providing me with the support and opportunity to conduct this research. Additionally, I am thankful to my supervisor for their valuable guidance and advice throughout the research process. Finally, my sincere appreciation goes to the participants from the EFL upper secondary school who willingly took part in this study. Their contribution and cooperation were essential for the successful completion of this research.

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