Improving the pronunciation of English learners through new learning process

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
	In Thailand, the achievement of English learners has been disappointing, despite the constant efforts to develop English education, and there is an urgent need for Thai learners to focus on the pronunciation of English. The research identified Thai English learners' specific English pronunciation problems. It also designed and facilitated a new self-directed learning process for learners to improve their English pronunciation, which is based on a combination of a community of practice (CoP) and self-directed learning. There were 15 participants selected purposively involved in this study. This study demonstrated how to use new learning process to identify specific problems and shares how to solve problems by practicing among participants so that the objectives can be reached. The new learning process was useful in helping users to improve their English pronunciation to communicate effectively in real life. The new learning process also can be used for other language learners. *This is an open access article under the CC BY-SA license.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is undeniable that English plays an increasingly important role across the globe, not only as a language for communication in a number of significant areas, but also as a means of social advancement. English has been making its way through Thailand ever since 1608. Its current status as the dominant international language has a huge impact on its usage in Thailand today [1].

Pronunciation is the production of speech sounds for communication. It is the most difficult area of English. Pronunciation teaching in English as a foreign language (EFL) curriculum has also been ignored for many factors [2]. As knowing grammar and vocabulary will enable the student to construct the sentences, they need to pronounce such of those correctly in order to avoid a communication breakdown. As Gilakjani [3] pointed out, if speakers' pronunciation is unintelligible, listeners will not understand them; hence, their communication will be unsuccessful. However, Thai people's pronunciation may be adversely affected by geographical differences and the fact that their mother tongue greatly differs from the standard English pronunciation [4]. Andrade also pointed out that, in this era, people tend to learn English for communicating or speaking skill rather than the other skills. However, speaking in a foreign language is often seen by people especially learners as the most challenging skill among other skills, since speaking and writing involve language production, and it is called as productive skills [5]. Despite being a necessity in an English language learning environment, pronunciation seems to be neglected, as Underhill [6] metaphorically stated

that pronunciation was comparable to Cinderella in the EFL world. Different reasons are attributable to the negligence of pronunciation teaching [7]. Besides, English has been gradually taught as a foreign language in Thailand for many decades, but although teaching is perceived to have succeeded in enhancing students' knowledge of English grammar and usage, for some reasons, it has failed to enable them to communicate fluently in real-life situations [8]. Hence, even though Thai students started to learn English from an early age, yet they still have a low level of English proficiency, especially in pronunciation skill.

In Chakma's research [9], Thai students usually omit the last consonant of consonant clusters such as an omitted /s/ in the word "tears" or do not pronounce /d/ in the word "find" which causes a non-severe problem but is still unintelligible for listeners. Moreover, it can be concluded from Khirin's [10] study that both high and low experienced English speakers noticeably produced /θ/ as /t/ in the final position. From the mentioned, it presented that several phonemes cause pronunciation problems for Thai students. Therefore, when they pronounced English phoneme sounds that do not occur in Thai sound system, they tended to substitute with Thai phoneme sounds instead [11]. Hence, by doing investigation and interviews, the results show that these English pronunciation problems have caused many misunderstandings in real-life communication; for instance, Thai people will pronounce pear /peə(r)/ as bear /beə(r)/, which are obviously two different words. The poor linguistic ability of some English teachers is another cause of the low communicative abilities of Thai students and a significant reason why today's Thai young generation find it extremely difficult to pronounce English words in real-life scenarios. For example, they will pronounce share /ʃeə(r)/ and chair /tʃeə(r)/ in the same way, which may cause misunderstanding when talking with others. In this context, it is vital that Thai students make every effort to improve their English pronunciation. However, one factor to improve learners' speaking ability is teaching the learners English pronunciation [12].

Plailek and Essien [13] claimed that Thai students have inadequate practicing time in English pronunciation and they need more speaking opportunity in real situations both in and outside the school environment. However, it is not easy for students who use English as a foreign language (EFL) to speak English fluently in an environment where English is rarely used outside the classroom [14]. So, it's necessary for them to improve their English pronunciation. Moreover, when designing the new learning process, all those elements would be taken into consideration and the final goal of the new process is to make the target group communicate effectively. This research has the following two main objectives: i) To identify the specific English pronunciation problem, and ii) To design and develop a new process of learning to improve the practical communicative English pronunciation.

The results of an investigation and survey indicated that the root cause of English pronunciation problems was the teacher-centered method, which paid less attention to pronunciation. Therefore, a new learning process was needed that would enable Thai self-directed English learners to improve their pronunciation. This would involve a combination of a community of practice (CoP) and the theory of self-directed learning. A CoP can provide an environment in which professionals can share their practical experience, develop and discuss areas of interests and build a sense of community [15], [16]. Also, the people in the CoP can engage in Self-directed learning, which is based on "learning on one's own" [17], [18], which is particularly suitable for adult learning and it also can be used as a model to learn other languages.

Some of the English pronunciation problems currently experienced by Thai English learners were found in this study by using pronunciation tests and online CoP activities. The first problem was that they could not clearly distinguish some voiceless consonants, while the second was that they could not correctly pronounce some stresses. Thirdly, they could not clearly distinguish long vowels from short ones and fourthly, swallowing the ending of a word was a serious issue. Last, but not least, they tended to pronounce /r/ as /l/ or a trill. Therefore, it was necessary to design a new learning process to improve these English pronunciation problems in order to achieve the second research objective.

The new learning process, which comprises a combination of CoP and self-directed learning, is designed to help to improve learners' English pronunciation. It will be divided into three parts, the first of which is the Content, which is related to the first step of "Motivation", and a CoP will be used as a motivational tool and to establish self-directed learning rules. Besides, the behavior of these English learners will be monitored during the process of their self-directed learning.

As mentioned earlier, a CoP will be merged into the new learning process designed in this study. A CoP refers to 'a set of relations among persons, activity and world' in which people are bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise or goal [19]. Based on Iverson, in CoPs, 'belonging is enacted through the mutual engagement, sharing of repertoires, and negotiation of the joint enterprise(s)' [20], and for an individual it may take different forms across different communities, ranging from full participation ('leading the practice' by the core group) to more peripheral or occasional participation [21]. It provides an environment in which professionals can build a sense of community by sharing their experience and developing and discussing areas of mutual interest. A CoP has three essential characteristics, the first of which is domain, which means that members must share a common interest. The second is community,

which refers to the regular interaction of members and the third is practice, which means that the members must be practitioners. A CoP is chosen as the main tool in this study for four reasons. The first is that it can help to identify the specific pronunciation problems of the target group and the second is that it can help to find the solution to these problems. Thirdly, the goal of the target group can be identified by merging a CoP into the learning process and finally, the process can be tested by the CoP. As for the target group, CoP, in this study, may be a peer assist group to leverage their skill or practice of English pronunciation.

In summary, not only can a CoP be useful for identifying the factors that cause pronunciation problems based on its definition and process, but it can also be useful in the learning process. What's more, an article has shown that the online CoPs can help raise teacher-practitioners' competence levels, reinforce their professional practice, and satisfy the need of professional development as well as students' academic achievement [22]. The target group can establish weekly goals and share their knowledge with each other via CoP activities, and CoP is different from a team in that it is held together by the shared learning and interests among its members. Since it is defined by knowledge rather than task and only exists due the value it has to its members, its life cycle is determined by that value rather than an institutional schedule. Furthermore, CoP for faculty development offer an effective and sustainable approach for knowledge management and implementation of best practices. A successful CoP creates and shares knowledge in the context of a specific practice toward the development of expertise [23]. So, in this article, CoP would be used to share knowledge about English pronunciation and the target group can learn more from it.

Self-directed learning will also be merged into the learning process. The concept of self-directed learning has been present since Loeng [24] first contact with the field of adult education in the mid of 1970s. According to Knowles [25], self-directed learning is not an educational fad, but a basic human competence. It is the ability to learn on one's own and learning on one's own; has been a persistent theme in this type of learning. The self-directed learning model shown in Figure 1 has three overlapping dimensions: self-management (task control), self-monitoring (cognitive responsibility), and motivation (entering and task).
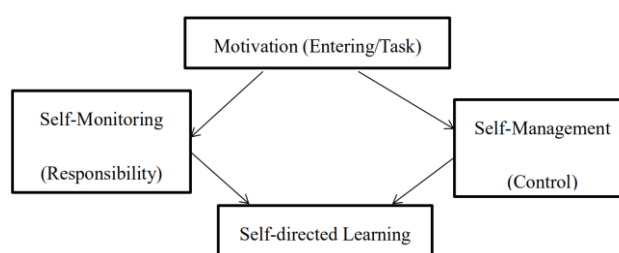

Figure 1. Dimensions of self-directed learning

According to Figure 1, the term "self-management" indicates an aspect of external task control specific to the management of activities in relation to learning, which are intimately linked to goals setting and meta-cognitive strategies, and the term "self-monitoring" is synonymous with the responsibility to construct meaning. This may involve in adding to and enriching existing knowledge structures or modifying and developing new knowledge. Self-management is concerned with the issue of task control. It is focused on the social and behavioral implementation of learning intentions, which are the external activities associated with the learning process. Hence, the new learning process contains some external activities for the target group to learn and practice English pronunciation, which may help to solve the pronunciation problems caused by the use of their mother tongue.

A content analysis will also be applied in this research to analyze the data collected from interviews and questionnaires. Content analysis can be used on all types of written texts no matter where the material comes from, such as focus group interviews [26], open-ended questions as in a questionnaire [27], or observations of situation [28]. Hence, it is the process of considering both the participant and context when sorting text into groups of related categories to identify similarities and differences, patterns, and associations both on the surface and implied within [29]. The method is considered high-yield in educational research because it is versatile and can be applied in both qualitative and quantitative studies [30]. Furthermore, qualitative content analysis is one of the several qualitative methods currently available for analyzing data and interpreting its meaning [31]. It can be summarized from the aforementioned diverse definitions that a content analysis is an observational research method. It is useful to systematically evaluate the symbolic content of all kinds of recorded communication. A content analysis is used in this study to evaluate the data derived from the online questionnaires and interviews. Moreover, by doing content analysis, the true feelings behind the interviewees can be inferred.

2.   RESEARCH METHOD

2.1. Experimental sample

The participants in this research were the staffs of the Knowledge Innovation Center (KIC) of the College of Art, Media and Technology (CAMT). Inclusion criteria were used to select 15 members of staffs who were willing to take part in the English pronunciation learning activities. There were four criteria for selecting them, the first of which was that they wanted to improve their English pronunciation. The second was that they had been learning English for a number of years and found pronunciation difficult. The third was that they should be under thirty years old, while the fourth was that they should be staff of the KIC. Before being invited to join the study, they had been taught English for work purposes at the Language Institute, where the teachers had divided them into three different groups based on their level of English. The three of them, who had the highest level, were placed in group A while six of them with a medium level were placed in group B. The remainder, who were placed in group C had the lowest English level.

As shown in Table 1, the staffs had different levels of pronunciation. Group C, who had the lowest level, was chosen as the target group to learn English using a CoP. A total 15 staffs of the KIC at the CAMT took part in this research as the target group. They already attended a native English conversation class in an English institution but, finding English pronunciation difficult. They decided that leveraging their English pronunciation skills and knowledge was the best solution to this problem. Their average age was 25 and correct pronunciation was essential for some of them who wanted to improve their pronunciation for future development, as well as for work purposes.

Since the KIC business program matches Thai small and medium enterprises (SMEs) with buyers from foreign countries, it is very important for the staffs to develop good pronunciation to be prepared for work in the future. However, after the survey test, only six staffs were chosen as the target group to use the new learning process. The teacher-centered method has been found to be the main cause of the problem, so different kinds of activities were planned for the staffs to practice their pronunciation, as shown in Table 2. However, since these activities may be a little different from those in a practical situation, they were modified in order to match the needs of the staffs.

Table 1. Sample groups

Name	Gender	Age	School	School type	First level
Staff 1	Female	25	Chongfah Sinseung Wanich Bamrung School	Private	B
Staff 2	Female	25	Bunyawat Witthayalai School	Public	C
Staff 3	Male	25	Assumption College Nakhonratchasima	Private	B
Staff 4	Female	25	Yupparaj Wittayalai School	Public	B
Staff 5	Female	25	Maerimwittayakhom School	Public	C
Staff 6	Female	26	Nareerat School Phrae	Public	C
Staff 7	Male	24	Yupparaj Wittayalai School	Public	A
Staff 8	Female	25	Chiangmai Christian School	Private	C
Staff 9	Female	25	Srisawatwittayakarnnan School	Public	C
Staff 10	Female	26	Wattanothai payap School	Public	B
Staff 11	Male	26	Yupparaj Wittayalai School	Public	B
Staff 12	Female	28	Chiangkhong Wittayakom School	Public	B
Staff 13	Male	27	Hangdongrathrathupathum School	Public	C
Staff 14	Male	25	Yupparaj Wittayalai School	Public	A
Staff 15	Female	25	Dara Academy	Private	A

Table 2. Points of activities designed for staffs

Activities	Contents
Pronunciation test	Staff take part in the test one by one
Internal CoP practice	Do moving dubbing and pronunciation learning in class
External CoP practice	Speak and practice with foreigners out of class

2.2. Experimental procedure

Table 3 reveals that a CoP and content analysis were used as the main tools to achieve the first objective. It is beginning with a documentary review of English pronunciation problems in order to identify the common English pronunciation problems of Thai people. The second step involved data gathering and in-depth interviews using CoP and a content analysis to identify the specific English pronunciation problems of the target group. To achieve the objective 2, CoP and self-directed learning were merged to develop the learning process, which was then used to improve the English pronunciation of the target group.

Table 3. Research process

Input	Process	Tools	Output
Objective 1: To identify the specific English pronunciation problems of the target group.	Documentary reviews about English pronunciation problems and CoP; Data gathering and in-depth interviews.	Content analysis. CoP.	Knowing the common English pronunciation problems; Knowing the specific English pronunciation problems of the target group.
Objective 2: To develop the process of learning, practicing and applying standard English pronunciation.	Designing learning process by using CoP and self-directed learning; CoP learning activities; CoP implementation; CoP evaluation	CoP. Self-directed learning.	The staff's English pronunciation has improved.

3.   RESULTS
3.1. Specific English pronunciation problems of participant

It is very important to test participants to determine their status. Therefore, a test was administered to the participants in this study to identify their specific English pronunciation problems. Part one of the test consisted of a background questionnaire in order to obtain personal information from the participants with questions related to variables such as their gender and the number of years they had been studying English. Part two of the test, which was designed according to the rules of the IELTS exam, was divided into four parts. The first part comprised a list of selected words, the second one of phrases, the third one of sentences and the last one of paragraphs. The three examiners had majored in English and passed the test for English Majors-Band 8 (TEM8). Besides, the staff came into the room one by one and were given a few minutes to review the questions and requirements before starting the test.

The answers to the first part of the online questionnaire shown in Table 4 indicate that the staff's high school teachers mainly taught them by using textbooks. They paid less attention to their English pronunciation and there were few in-class activities for them to practice it. These participants had attended different high schools.

Table 4. The first part of the test

Name	Question: How did your teachers teach English in class in high school?
Staff 1	Just in the English class
Staff 2	Taught me based on English books
Staff 3	Speak in font the class, repeat after her/him, read in a textbook, presentation in front of the class
Staff 4	Repeat after her, from exercise book
Staff 5	Speak in front of the class, from exercise book and do homework.
Staff 6	Do exercises, listening from media, speaking sometimes, grammar
Staff 7	Followed the textbook and conversation. Sometime they played games like Hangman.
Staff 8	Read a story, textbook, fill in the blanks, exercise
Staff 9	Grammar, conversion, reading and listening
Staff 10	Conversation and grammar
Staff 11	According to the Thai education curriculum
Staff 12	Followed the text book
Staff 13	Grammar reading conversations
Staff 14	Followed school textbook
Staff 15	Played games, read a book, sing a song, do exercises and give homework

There are four participants graduated from private schools and the others from public schools. They had learned English when they were very young and they now have three English classes every week. However, their current classes have the same features of little chance to speak English, few activities in class, and teachers who pay less attention to their English pronunciation. Most importantly, they said that their teachers taught them by mainly concentrating on grammar, reading, and writing. Besides, the use of English in daily life is already studied for many years. Even, one participant had even started learning it at kindergarten. Unfortunately, they found it difficult to communicate with foreigners from China, Russia, Laos and some Middle-east Asian countries for work purposes due to problems with pronunciation. Moreover, it was interesting when the staff were asked about the cause of their pronunciation problems, most of them said it was due to a lack of confidence. It is duly noted when designing the new teaching process.

The words of the pronunciation test are shown in Table 5. Most of the staff pronounced the first two words, 'pace' /peɪs/ and 'base' /beɪs/ the same during the test, mixing the phonetics /p/ and /b/. Most of them could not clearly distinguish 'chair' and 'share' but pronounced them both the same. Therefore, the staff's pronunciation faced several problems. They could not distinguish some voiceless consonants such as they pronounced /p/ as /b/. They also could not pronounce stress correctly. Table 5 reveals that they pronounced

'university' /juːnɪˈvɜːsəti/ as /juːnɪvɜːsəˈti/, putting the stress on the fourth phonetic. Hence, they could not distinguish 'food' /fuːd/, which has a long vowel, from 'foot' /fʊt/, which has a short vowel, and could not pronounce them clearly. The most serious problem was swallowing the ending of a word. Furthermore, they always pronounced /r/ as /l/ or a trill. Since the results were similar to those found in the literature review, they could be used to design a new learning. It would help the staff to improve their English pronunciation.

Table 5. The second part of the test

	Please read the following words (25 points)					Scores (average)
1	pace	base	save	safe	police	2.5
2	please	chair	share	bear	pear	2.5
3	cheap	jeeps	hats	hands	low	3.0
4	know	lice	nice	air	year	4.0
5	ear	food	foot	congratulation	university	3.0

After online questionnaire and test, two Thai teachers who are teaching English at high school were interviewed online. The questions were designed under the guidance of Gilakjani and Rahimy [32] so that semi-structured interviews could be used as an instrument of the qualitative method. As shown in Table 6, it was interesting to note that the teachers do most of the speaking in class and the students have little chance to express themselves. The two teachers said they knew that speaking was a very important part of learning English and they wanted to give their students time to practice what they had learned, but it was really hard to find a balance in reality. They were forced to focus on grammar, writing and reading because these were vital components of the university entrance examination. Since both teachers said that they wanted to change the teaching method from teacher-centered to student-centered, the staff would be given more chances to speak and practice via CoP in the new teaching process.

The timetable of their previous English class provided by the target group and confirmed by high school teachers is shown in Table 7. They appeared to have six English classes every week, each lasting for 50 minutes. They usually studied in the classroom with a textbook, some electronic materials, and paper exercise. However, the teacher paid less attention to speaking and the fact that the students were given less than 10 minutes to practice speaking may have contributed to their poor pronunciation. The teacher-centered teaching method that mainly focused on reading and writing is the cause of the participants' poor English pronunciation.

Table 6. Results of the online interview

Questions	Teacher 1 (EP)	Teacher 2 (MP)
1. How often do you have English classes in your school?	Six classes a week (50 mins each class)	Four classes a week.
2. What is the teaching method?	Both teacher-centered and student-centered, but the last one in an ideal world.	Use teacher and student-centered.
3. What proportion is the speaking part?	Only about 20%.	Four skills.
4. Which part of English teaching is the most important?	Every part is important! But we spend a lot of time writing and reading.	I think it necessary to adjust the teaching plan.
5. Is it necessary to adjust the teaching method?	Yes, depending on the situation.	By situation and students.
6. What will you do to adjust the teaching plan?	Firstly, students expect to be able to communicate in English. If so, v should focus on speaking and listening. The last one, students r, expect to be able to pass the exam and get a place at a good university. If so, v should focus on writing and reading.	Yes, of course, but in real situations, speaking takes up no more than ten minutes.
7. Do think the speaking part is important for English study?	Yes.	Yes, of course, but in real situations, speaking takes up no more than ten minutes.

Table 7. Timetable of the previous English class

Monday (50mins)	Tuesday (50mins)	Wednesday (100mins)	Thursday (50mins)	Friday (50mins)
Vocabulary (25mins)	Vocabulary (10mins)	Grammar (30mins)	Reading (30mins)	Writing (35mins)
Speaking (10mins)	Grammar (30mins)	Reading (40mins)	Writing (15mins)	Exercise (15mins)
Listening (10mins)	Class exercise (10mins)	Speaking (10mins)	Class exercise (5mins)	
Culture (5mins)		Culture (10mins)		
		Paper exercise (10mins)		

3.2. New learning process

Having learned the cause of the staff's pronunciation problems, the new learning process was designed based on the merger of CoP and self-directed learning, as shown in Figure 2. The use of a CoP in the first round of was expected to enhance the participants' English learning with a focus on pronunciation. This would help to identify specific problems for further investigation in the second round, when these problems were likely to be solved. It can be done by the participants sharing experience, which would be merged with good practice designed and implemented in the third round.

CoP activities are known to have three crucial elements, the first of which is "C" for community. In this new learning process, the community was composed of professional English teachers who majored in English and have obtained a test for English Majors-Band 8 (TEM-8) certificate, and six other staffs of the KIC. There was also a guest speaker, who studied in America for more than six years, but still has a local accent. This was an online community via Zoom platform.

The second element of CoP activity is domain, which means that the participants must have the same interests or the same goal. Since the six participants in this new learning process were mainly interested in studying English in relation to China, SMEs in China, work in China, the domain was their common interest in learning to pronounce English correctly to accommodate their work with Chinese SMEs. The third most crucial element of CoP activities is "P" for practice and the new learning process included many different kinds of external and internal scenarios in which the participants could practice their English pronunciation. Hence, in order to attract different constituencies who do not regularly interact, it is important to provide a 'safe place' where knowledge, skills and ideas can be shared, explored, adapted and applied [33]. Building trust is frequently mentioned in the literature as a key aspect of stakeholder engagement in general [34]–[36] and CoPs specifically. So, a friendly and open culture with chances of interaction and discussion would be provided for the target group to improve their English pronunciation.

As shown in the picture, the process was divided into three parts, the first of which was the Content, which was related to the first step of "Motivation". CoP members (the target group) were motivated to undertake the tasks that were decided at the CoP meeting and rules were established for monitoring and management so that they could self-direct their learning. In this part, the CoP activities were arranged once or twice a week to communicate with the staffs, to choose new tasks for the next step and conduct the whole process. The second part required the involvement of a "foreign teacher", whose main duties were to provide the staffs with guidance in relation to the tasks and to design practice before the staffs learned for themselves. The role of the foreign teacher in this part was as a conductor to instruct the staffs about the rules and techniques of correct pronouncement. The target group was taught to pronounce English via Zoom using a tongue bitmap and other interesting activities. Finally, the third part involved self-directed learning based on "internal CoP practice" and "external CoP practice".

Practice helps to solve the pronunciation problems caused by the mother tongue. Therefore, the new learning process included many different kinds of speaking activities for the participants to enhance their English pronunciation. In external CoP practice, which was based on self-directed learning, the participants were tasked with finding some foreigners, who would finally be the experts in the external CoP activities, and communicating with them. The purpose of this CoP activity was to enable the target group to practice their English pronunciation during the communication and identify their pronunciation problems, as well as resolve them by imitating the experts. Besides, the foreigners scored the staff's pronunciation and suggested how it could be improved. The problems highlighted by the experts were recorded and used as a basis for class learning. The internal CoP practice included a group review and summary, which involved the target group moving dubbing in groups of three and then sharing their actions with each other. After sharing, the staffs and the teacher were required to comment and give suggestions about the pronunciation before recording and resolving the pronunciation problems.

Moreover, the topic for each Zoom activity was decided based on gathering information from the target group. If the chosen topic was China, for example, the teacher gave an introduction of China, but, since the key points of the learning process were the pronunciation problems of /b/, /p/ and others, all the words or phrases used in the class were connected to those problems. Also, the staffs were given more chances to speak, and they had five minutes to prepare for an introduction of Thailand. The other classes were all like this, but with different topics, with the main aim of improving the staff's pronunciation problems. The teacher mainly focused on pronunciation during the process of developing the topics.

In the new learning process, teachers only played a role as guides or consultants, while the participants had more freedom and more chances to speak and practice. They could choose what they wanted to improve based on their critical needs. The use of this new learning process enabled the gap between knowledge sharing and knowledge learning to be closed. The staffs learned from the teachers and put it into practice. If they still identified problems, they were able to resolve them with further practice. Besides, using a CoP enabled the staffs to learn from others, as well as sharing what they had learned.
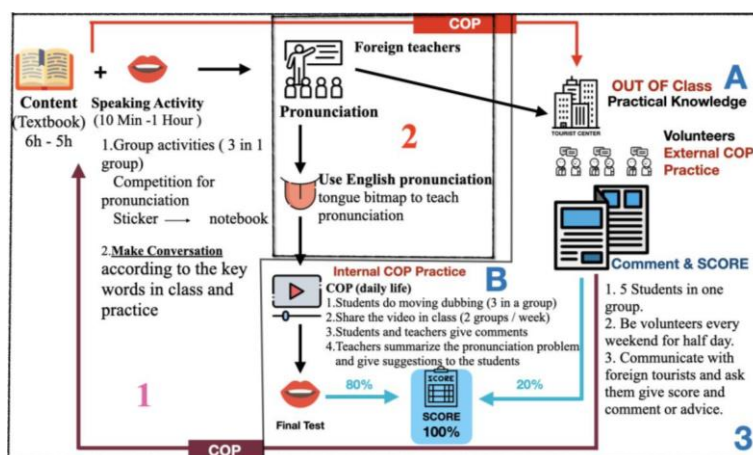
Figure 2. New learning process

4. DISCUSSION

Interviews, questionnaires and tests were used to identify the staff's specific English pronunciation problems to achieve the first research objective. The results showed the existence of pronunciation problems that could cause misunderstanding in real life when talking with others. The first of the five different pronunciation problems identified was stress in terms of applying the stress on a word incorrectly; for example, when articulating the word "university /ˌjuːniˈvəːsiti/", they put the stress on the fourth phonetic. The second problem was that they mispronounced /r/ as /l/; for example, they pronounced the word "crystal /ˈkristl/" as /ˈklistl/. The third problem was that they could not distinguish /b/ and /p/ in the test, and most of them pronounced "bear" as "pear". Hence, the fourth problem was that they mispronounced long vowels as short ones. Moreover, the fifth one, which was the most serious, was the phenomenon of swallowing the ending of a word.

Hence, a new learning process was designed to help to the staffs to improve their pronunciation. They were required to participate in all the activities and practice what they had learned. In this way, they shared what they had learned with others in the CoP, while also learning from each other. After using the new learning process under the guidance of the teacher, the staff's pronunciation problems had improved a little. In fact, one of them, who scored 80 in the latest test, could clearly distinguish "send" and "sent", which was a step forward on the road to improvement. Besides, during the process of teaching, in order to match the goal of making the target group speak communicatively, a structurally-based teaching device: the minimal pair drill was used. By using this kind of method, the target group's ability to distinguish the relative English pronunciation is improved.

Many factors contribute to learners' ability to pronounce words in another language and English pronunciation is no exception. Previous researchers have consistently found that factors such as the native language, age, exposure, innate phonetic ability, identity, language ego, motivation and concern for good pronunciation, appear to influence the teaching and learning of pronunciation [37]. However, the current study was only focused on the effect of teachers' teaching method and the development of a new learning process to improve Thai English learners' pronunciation.

It was mentioned earlier that English language teaching and learning in Thailand is mainly focused on the four macro language skills and pronunciation is relatively neglected. Although English is taught from kindergarten to the highest educational level as a fundamental subject in the Thai curriculum, the teaching of English in Thailand has often been said to have failed. Sahatsathatsana [38] also observed that although Thai students learn English for more than ten years at school, most of them cannot use it effectively to express themselves. The results of this study have highlighted the role of pronunciation in English language learning and provided a new learning process for Thai self-directed English learners based on the use of CoP activities, in which they had more chances to be exposed to an English environment and practice talking with foreigners in English.

This study was different from its predecessors. The provision of a new learning process based on the use of CoP to solve the problems caused by the teacher-centered method, in which the teacher takes control of the class, as well as examples of using activities in class and out of class to motivate students. A new method of using knowledge management tools to solve language-learning problems was also proposed, which may be of interest to learners who want to master a language.

5. CONCLUSION

The focus of this study was English learners English pronunciation problems and a new learning process was developed using a CoP and self-directed learning. The participants' specific pronunciation problems were identified from a series of online questionnaires and interviews, and the research findings indicated the existence of pronunciation problems among those English learners. Having identified the root cause of the participants' English pronunciation problems, a new learning process was designed to help them improve. Finally, the new learning process was modified based on practice in real-life scenarios. An example was provided by using CoP to share knowledge and acquire new ideas for learning and teaching a language. This study confirmed that the proposed learning process was useful to improve English pronunciation and communicate effectively in real life. The new learning process also can be used for other language learners.

However, this research has several limitations. A small number of people were chosen as the target group. Only six staffs were tested the new teaching process and only two teachers took part in the online interview to provide the current status of English teaching in Thailand. Besides, questionnaires, interviews and the whole teaching process took place online via WeChat, Line, Facebook and Zoom due to COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, there was no opportunity to talk face-to-face with the high school teachers so that their reactions to the questions could only be inferred from their words and emotions online. Further research should be done with larger sample size and through face-to-face interview.

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