"Read It Like You Mean It": Developing Prosodic Reading Using Reader's Theater

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Abstract

Prosody is a linguistic feature in spoken English that is complex yet plays an important role in oral communication. Nevertheless, many EFL pronunciation classes in Thailand have not adequately emphasized the importance and functions of prosody to learners. This research study aims to investigate effect of an oral fluency instructional method called Reader's Theater on Thai EFL university students' perception and production of the prosodic features of pausing and sentence final intonation. The participants of this study are 22 Thai university students majoring in English. The results revealed that the students' perception of these prosodic features increased and that the production of prosody shows correlation with comprehensibility. These results also suggest that effective modelling of oral fluency as an input is crucial to the perception of learners, and ultimately that prosody should be implemented in pronunciation classes in the EFL curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Reader's Theater (RT) has garnered popularity as an effective teaching method for improving oral fluency in language learners. RT evolved from Repeated Reading (RR) which is the method of reading the same passage orally or silently several times until achieving the desired level of fluency (Samuels, 1979; Lekwilai, 2016). However, this method is a mundane activity. RR has to engage the reader to revisit the same passage without losing motivation along the way. In reality, not many readers want to re-read the same text more than once even for the purpose of practice. Most importantly, RR has frequently been reported to focus only on reading rate and word accuracy (Hudson et.al., 2005; Nation, 2009) rather than authentic fluency. Given that prosody is one of the key components of reading fluency (National Reading Panel, 2000), a number of scholars proposed that repeated reading tasks should be conducted in more expressive oral performance (Rasinski, 2004; Nation, 2009). Not only does RT retain the characteristics of RR by engaging the reader to re-read the same text several times, but it provides a meaningful reason to re-read the text: to rehearse. In this regard, Martinez et.al. (1998) reported that reading practice as 'rehearsal' proved to be motivational when doing repeated readings. This is how RT has come into the spotlight since it has reportedly been effective to increase reading rate, accuracy, and also prosody (Hudson et.al., 2005; Trainin & Andrzejczak, 2006; Callard, 2008).

Because this research study will focus particularly on using RT to develop learners' prosody in oral reading, the definition of prosody will be discussed first. Young and Rasinski (2009) defined prosody as "the ability of readers to render a text with appropriate expression and phrasing to reflect the semantic and syntactic content of the passage." Hardison (2004) referred to prosody collectively as pitch, tempo, and rhythm. According to Cutler et.al (1997), prosody is the linguistic structure that determines the suprasegmental properties of utterances. Suprasegmental features can be identified as pitch, tempo, loudness, or duration. Although some may argue that some suprasegmental features such as pitch and loudness may vary depending on paralinguistic qualities (e.g. emotional state, attitude, social group of a speaker), the definition of prosody according to Cutler el.al. (1997) insists on not including those paralinguistic qualities. This research study will adhere to the definition of prosody proposed by Cutler el.al. (1997).

Mennen and de Leeuw (2014) avowed that prosody contains crucial functions in communication: first, prosody is used to convey a variety of types of information. To illustrate, the falling and the rising pitch in an utterance such as "You do that again" can be perceived either as the speaker informing or as the speaker asking. Furthermore, the pitch can suggest turn-taking between the speakers. In the same utterance, if the falling pitch is applied, it can suggest that the speaker is finished and the other may take their turn in the conversation. On the contrary, if the utterance ends with the rising pitch, the other speaker may anticipate another utterance to follow. In addition, words applied with a higher pitch than others within an utterance can convey different information as well. For example, when the word 'on' is emphasized in an utterance (The keys are ON the dining table), the listener is informed to look for the keys on the dining table and not underneath it. If the same utterance places the emphasis on other words, like for example, the keys are on the DINING table, the listener may look for the keys on the dining table and not on the coffee table. Second, prosody is used to convey lexical meaning. In English, words that contain more than one syllable have unequal pitch among the syllables, and this characteristic contributes to different meanings of the same word. For instance, the word 'PERfect' uttered with the high pitch in the first syllable is perceived differently from 'perFECT' uttered with the high pitch in the second syllable, the former acting as a noun and the latter as a verb. Lastly, prosody helps group meaningful units of words within an utterance. Mennen and de Leeuw (2014) called this function of prosody 'prosodic phrasing', which is realized by pauses between words or groups of words within an utterance. Prosodic phrasing conveys the syntactical boundaries that sometimes help disambiguate an utterance that is structurally ambiguous. For instance, two sentences such as *'There are FIVE-YEAR-OLD bottles of wine in the cellar'.,* and *'There are five YEAR-OLD bottles of wine in the cellar'*. can be disambiguated by pausing. To convey the meaning of the second sentence, the speaker may pause between 'five' and 'year-old bottles of wine'. These functions of prosody may be exhibited naturally among L1 speakers while they need to be explicitly taught to L2 speakers.

Mastering prosodic properties of English is a difficult task for the majority of ESL/EFL learners, considering the complexity of prosody itself. As Mennen and de Leeuw (2014) pointed out, not only do L2 learners need to learn the structural elements of prosody such as pitch, intonation and stress, but they also need to be aware of the multidimensional functions of these elements and how different structural elements are combined so that the meaning is realized.

This argument aligns with Hardison (2004) who stated that "part of learning a spoken language is the acquisition of its systematic rhythmic organization".

Given the importance of prosody in communication, several studies (e.g. Hardison, 2004; Levis & Pickering, 2004; Derwing & Munro, 2005; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016) indicate that pronunciation teaching has been neglected, or in some cases, is not being taught explicitly. According to Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016), many EFL classrooms do not provide a lesson that is focused on pronunciation practice, but rather make pronunciation an additional activity. Although many learners may struggle but eventually master correct pronunciation of an individual English consonant and vowel sound, this does not guarantee successful communication because people do not utter segments of sound but rather groups of words or phrases. This fact is supported by Mennen and de Leeuw (2014) who stated that "successful L2 pronunciation involves not only learning how to authentically produce all the individual sounds of the target language but also the acquisition of the L2's unique prosody". Similarly, previous studies (Lennon, 1990; Derwing & Rossiter 2003; Fayer & Karsinski, 1995 cited in Tanner & Landon, 2009) suggest that the prosody of non-native speakers affects the comprehensibility to native listeners, particularly when non-native speakers' speech contains longer individual pauses and greater total pause time.

Tennant (2007) and Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016) emphasized the importance of explicit instruction on pronunciation. Particularly, they stress the importance of suprasegmental features, stating that correct pronunciation is necessary for successful communication of non-native speakers, especially for those who cannot eliminate the habits of their native pronunciation because their native tongue belongs to syllable-timed language. Given my own experience in the field of English language teaching in Thailand in the past decade, pronunciation lessons, if not entirely neglected, dedicate focus at the segmental level. Thai EFL learners, whose mother tongue belongs to a syllable-timed language, frequently find themselves not being understood despite the fact that some of them have mastered accuracy in word pronunciation. By the same token, the habitude of the Thai pronunciation system, which is grouped in a syllable-timed language, causes difficulties for Thai learners when listening to English (Kettongma & Wasuntarasobhit, 2015). Since the lack of understanding of the covert functions of prosody could negatively affect comprehensibility in communication, this highlights the necessity of Thai EFL learners to be exposed to the sound patterns of English at suprasegmental level.

The following section will discuss related studies that focus on the instruction of prosodic features of English as well as the role of reading in such instruction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empirical studies that focus on the teaching of pronunciation emphasize the importance of learners' perception and production of prosody in oral communication. A number of researchers agree that teaching pronunciation should be extended beyond segmental features. In their study, Derwing and Rossiter (2003) divided 48 non-native participants into three groups: two treatment groups and one control group. The participants in the treatment groups were exposed

to different types of instruction. The first treatment group received Global instruction, which primarily focused on prosodic features, and the second treatment group received Segmental instruction, which focused on consonants and vowels. The control group was taught with no specific pronunciation instruction. The result revealed that the participants in the Global instruction group significantly improved their oral fluency and comprehensibility, despite making more phonological errors than the Segmental group. Similarly, Tanner and Landon (2009) investigated the treatment of suprasegmentals instruction to non-native learners. They looked to learn effects on their perception and production of pausing, stress, intonation, as well as their perceived comprehensibility to native listeners. Their study revealed that the treatment improved the learners' perception and production of suprasegmentals features of English.

Regarding instructional methods of teaching prosody, a growing number of experimental studies have reported the effectiveness of using technology to assist pronunciation teaching. Hardison (2004) conducted a 3-week training course of French for native English-speaking learners. The focus of the course was on prosody in French, and the instruction employed a real-time computerized pitch display. The work of Levis and Pickering (2004) also focused on discourse-based instruction of intonation using speech visualization technology. The study intended to explore the crucial role of visualization technology as well as learners' awareness of how intonation functions in discourse rather than solely on isolated sentences. Cued Pronunciation Readings (CPRs) was incorporated with computer-assisted practice in the work of Tanner and Landon (2009). For this method, the teacher's involvement in the instruction was very low because CPR tasks mainly engage the learners in self-directed environment.

It is interesting to note that the aforementioned studies shared a fair degree of native speaker involvement. Firstly, native speakers are the source pronunciation model. According to the majority of studies (e.g. Hardison, 2004; Levis &Pickering, 2004; Tanner & Landon, 2009), the participants are required to listen to short utterances or passages recorded by native speakers before producing speech sounds that match the original pitch contour. Secondly, native speakers play the role of the judge who determines the comprehensibility and intelligibility of the participants' speech production. In the study of Derwing and Rossiter (2003), two groups of native speaking informants were used as listeners who listened to the excerpted speech samples of the non-native participants. The first group consisted of ten 'novice' native speakers (who are not accustomed to listening to or working with non-natives), and the second consisted of two expert judges: the native speakers who had advanced degrees in linguistics. The role of the native speakers as a model of fluency and a judge of comprehensibility will be discussed further in this section as it will be relevant to adaptation of Reader's Theater to pronunciation teaching.

Compared to the aforementioned studies, Reader's Theater (RT) is a relatively minimalistic method of developing prosody. Apart from the script and optional props, RT needs does not require digital equipment. Even without technological aids, RT has been empirically proven as an effective method to help learners improve in all areas of fluency, including prosody (Rasinski & Padak, 2000; Hudson et.al., 2005). In addition, RT offers psychological support to learners alongside fluency development. What learners gain from RT is experience with self-directed

learning and also a cooperative learning environment. Because the outcome of RT is performance, it encourages learners to spend their extra time outside of classroom rehearsing the script individually. Group rehearsals also foster cooperative learning as members of the group discuss their comprehension of the script, guide one another to correct pronunciation, and negotiate suitable expression according to their interpretation of characters and scenarios in the script (Liu, 2000). The most empowering reason of all is that RT establishes motivation and confidence upon disfluent learners (Martinez et.al., 1998; Rinehart, 1999; Haws, 2008; McKay, 2008; Alspach, 2010).

Previous studies about RT emphasize the need for effective modelling of reading aloud, reporting that it is important to raise awareness of oral fluency among disfluent readers (Martinez et.al., 1998; Hudson et.al., 2005; Lekwilai, 2016). To conduct RT in classrooms, modelling by the teacher is an immediate step after an RT script is introduced (Lekwilai, 2014; Lekwilai, 2016), and to ensure effectiveness of modelling, the teacher's pronunciation should be of near-native proficiency.

Although empirical studies favored RT on the grounds that it is one of the teaching methods that both fosters in students' fluency in oral reading and entertains them, the implementation of RT in Thai EFL classrooms is very limited. There is little evidence on the horizon of publications that address using RT for developing Thai EFL learners' oral reading fluency or pronunciation. Among a few studies, Srimalee and Charubusp (2018) reported that RT is an alternative reading activity that easily catches students' attention, and that it can enhance students' reading motivation. Similarly, upon implementing RT in my previous study (Lekwilai, 2016), I found that RT is a teaching method that does not only improve the students' oral fluency, but it also effectively entertains the students. The implementation of RT could be extended beyond developing reading skills to pronunciation and speaking skills. According to Dougill (1987), scripts "provide a rich resource of comprehensible input in language that is natural and spoken… [and] also offer psychological security to the student". In this regard, RT could be suitable for Thai EFL students who wish to improve their pronunciation and speaking skills. To elaborate, RT offers authentic situations to practice pronunciation as students are required to bring their characters to life. Furthermore, students could acquire memorized phrases and expressions from RT scripts instead of individual words. For those who frequently find themselves 'stuck' in a conversation because it takes them time to think about the vocabulary and grammatical structure, practicing RT scripts may help enhance their resources in terms of the vocabulary and memorized expressions they need in oral communication.

My growing interest of using RT to develop pronunciation skills arises from the fact that English pronunciation has been neglected in instruction at some universities in Thailand (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016), and also the fact that pronunciation classes focus on segmental aspects of the pronunciation that may not ensure intelligibility in oral communication as much as the suprasegmental aspects.

Research objectives

1) To investigate whether Reader's Theater increases the perception and production of prosody in Thai EFL students
2) To investigate the relationship between perception and production of prosody among Thai EFL students
3) To investigate the relationship between production of prosody and comprehensibility as perceived by native speakers

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study employs a quantitative method to measure the perception and production of prosody in oral reading among Thai EFL students.

Participants

1. EFL students

Twenty-two English major students in a university program volunteered to participate in this study. The age range is 20-22 years old. All participants are Thai and speak Thai as their mother language. The participants speak English as a foreign language, and have been studying English since their primary education. Based on the CEFR descriptions, they were identified at B1 to B2 level. None of the participant received education in English-speaking countries. Even though English major students are required to take courses that focus on listening and speaking skills, the participants reported that they still wished to improve these skills because they did not have much opportunity to practice in higher-level courses. English-major EFL learners were selected because they had completed the basic major requirement courses that focused on the segmentals; hence, they were assumed fluent at the individual word-level.

2. Native-Speaking judges

Four native speakers were asked to listen and give ratings to the participants' oral reading in the pre-test and the post-test. The first native speaker is a 39-year-old male from London, UK, who speaks Standard British English dialect as a mother tongue. The other three native speakers are American who speak Standard American English dialect as a mother tongue. Two American speakers are female: a 30-year-old from Utah, and a 32-year-old from Wisconsin. The other is a 38-year-old male from Oregon. The four native speakers spent their time working in Thailand for less than one year. None of them have had contact with Thai-speaking communities prior to living in Thailand.

3. Native-Speaking readers

Five native speakers volunteered to read aloud and record the passage and the Reader's Theater script (discussed in 3.3). The volunteers were three male speakers and two female speakers. Three of the volunteers speak Standard American English, and two speak Standard British English.

Treatment

1) Read-aloud passage: a Russian fable *The Scorpion and the Frog*, adapted by Holmes (2004), was selected as a passage for the participants to read aloud in the pre-test and the post-test. This adapted version of the fable consisted of 432 words with a Flesch Reading Ease score of 78.4 (fairly easy to read) which is comparable to CEFR B1 ("A comparison of different readability scales", n.d.)
2) Reader's Theater script: a short story, *The Necklace* by Guy de Maupassant, was recast as a Reader's Theater script by Barchers and Kroll (2002) and was selected as the treatment in this study. The script was divided into five parts: two narration parts (narrator 1 and 2) and three speaking parts (three main characters). The script consisted of 1832 words. Flesch Reading Ease score of 80.4 (easy to read) which is comparable to CEFR A2 ("A comparison of different readability scales", n.d.)
3) Audio materials: the Read-Aloud passage and the Reader's Theater script were recorded prior to the data collection period. The recordings were kept as mp3 files and would be used as a model for the participants. Five native-speaking readers read aloud and recorded the passage and the script. *The Scorpion and the Frog* was recorded by the male speaker of Standard British English. The Necklace was recorded by all of the native-speaking readers according to their assigned roles in the script.

Procedure

The data collection was conducted over an 8-week period. Week 1 and Week 8 were given to the pre-test and the post-test, respectively, while Week 2 to Week 7 were spent on the Reader's Theater treatment.

1. Establishing answer keys

Prior to the pre-test, the five native-speaking readers were asked to create answer keys which would be used for Speech Perception Task. There were two criteria to test the participants on Speech Perception Task: 1) perception of mid-sentence pauses and 2) sentence-final intonation. First, the native-speaking readers were asked to establish the answer key for mid-sentence pauses. A simplified format of the passage which showed the list of 18 isolated sentences was given to the native-speaking readers to mark pauses. The sentence-final pauses were not required because they should already be signaled by the full stops. The marked positions of pause in the passage were then compared and negotiated among the native-speaking readers. There were 34 pause positions marked in the passage by all of the native-speaking readers. There are four other pause positions that were not marked by consensus. It was concluded in

the answer key that the 34 pause positions were mandatory, and the four pause positions were optional (they would not count against the participants if the participants mark pauses on these positions.)

The next task for the native-speaking readers was to establish the answer key for sentence-final intonation. The native-speaking readers were asked to mark at the end of the sentence with two types of intonation: the rising intonation and the falling intonation. The rising intonation would be marked by the symbol (↗) and the falling intonation by the symbol (↘). Another simplified format of the passage was given to the native-speaking readers to mark the sentence-final intonation. In this format, the number of the sentences in the passage was increased to 23 because some sentences were separated between the speaking part and the narration part. For instance, the sentence *"Why do you laugh?, asked the frog."* was divided into *"Why do you laugh?"* and *"asked the frog"*. All native-speaking readers marked every sentence with the falling intonation. Once the answer keys were established, one male native-speaking reader volunteered to record the passage by reading aloud with the exact same pause and intonation as shown in the answer keys.

During the pre-test and the post-test, the participants were assigned the following tasks: Speech Perception Task and Read-Aloud Performance Task.

2. Speech Perception Task

The participants were given a copy of *The Scorpion and the Frog* to read silently for two minutes. Then, the participants were instructed to listen to the audio version of the passage twice. At the end of the first listening, the participants were asked to mark (/) to the entire passage where they perceived pauses. The participants listened to the audio passage for a second time. At the end of the second listening, they were asked to mark at the end of each sentence in the passage a (↗) where they perceived the rising pitch, and a (↘) where they perceived the falling pitch. The post-test was conducted in the exact same way as the pre-test, except the audio version of the passage was not played for the participants while they marked the passage. The reason that the audio was omitted in the post-test was to prove the effect of Reader's Theater treatment upon the participants' perception of pause and intonation when the participants revisited the same text in the post-test.

3. Read-Aloud Performance Task

Immediately after the perception task, the individual participant performed reading the passage aloud. The participants were instructed to read with pauses and sentence-final intonation in accordance with the marks they made on the passage. Their oral readings were recorded with a laptop computer for scoring and comparing between the pre-test and the post-test. The scoring would be conducted by the two native-speaking judges using the scoring rubric (see the section following the next).

4. Reader's Theater treatment

During the course of six weeks (Week 2 to Week 7), the participants were appointed to meet once a week for a 90-minute Reader's Theater session. On Week 2, the RT script *The Necklace* was introduced. Each participant was given a copy of the script. The audio version of the script was played while the participants silently read along with the script. The next step was a group discussion of the story. A set of guided questions was prepared to engage the participants with oral discussion of the story and the characters' personality traits and motivation. Once the participants exhibited a thorough understanding of the script, they were asked to get into a group of 4-5 in order to assign the roles to each group member. At the end of the first RT session, the participants were advised to mark pauses and sentence-final intonation on their reading parts in the script, and were encouraged to orally practice the script before the next meeting.

The sessions during Week 3 to Week 6 followed the same pattern. Each session began with a group rehearsal of the selected part of the script for 20 minutes, followed by another 20 minutes for comments and feedback. Afterwards, a 40-minute activity required the participants to regroup. The new groups were formed with participants from each group who performed the same role. They took turns reading aloud and exchanging comments and feedback to one another, discussing how they applied pitch and expression according to their interpretation of the characters and the contexts. As a participatory researcher, I closely monitored the discussion and occasionally intervened when the participants asked for consultation. Then, I took ten minutes to conclude the insights from the rehearsal and gave overall feedback to the participants. Lastly, the script performance took place on Week 7. Each group performed the script in front of class, followed by feedback from the audience.

5. Scoring of Speech Perception Task

At the end of the pre-test and the post-test, the marked copies of *The Scorpion and the Frog* from the participants were collected for Speech Perception Task scoring. The scoring was aligned with the two main criteria of the aforementioned Speech Perception Tasks: 1) mid-sentence pause and 2) sentence-final intonation. For mid-sentence pause, errors were set as two types: incorrect and incomplete. The first type refers to the marking of pauses in the positions that should not have pauses, and the latter refers to absence of pause marks in the positions that should have pauses. Errors for sentence-final intonation is either correct or incorrect. The total score of mid-sentence pause were 34 and the total score of sentence-final intonation was 23. The scoring of both criteria accounted for the number of marking errors made by the participants and could deduct them from the total score.

6. Scoring of Read-Aloud Performance Task

In order to investigate how the participants' oral fluency and comprehensibility are perceived by non-sympathetic native listeners (native speakers who are unfamiliar with non-native accents), four native-speaking judges were asked to listen to the recordings of the participants'

Read-Aloud Performance Task from the pre-test and the post-test. Two sets of the 4-point scale-scoring rubric were prepared as an online Google Form. The first is Overall Perceived Prosody Rubric (see Table 1), which was adapted from a Multidimensional Fluency Scale (Zutell & Rasinski, 1991). The second is Overall Perceived Comprehensibility Rubric (see Table 2) adapted from Tanner and Landon (2009). The judges were divided into two groups: the first group consisted of a male speaker from UK and a female speaker from Utah, USA, and the second group consisted of a female speaker from Wisconsin, USA and a male speaker from Oregon. The first group of judges was tasked with rating the overall perceived prosody and the second with rating the overall perceived comprehensibility.

Table 1

Scoring rubric for overall perceived prosody

Score	1	2	3	4
Overall perceived prosody	- Reads in a quiet and monotonous voice throughout the sentence as if to get words out. - Reads word-by-word throughout the sentence	- Read mostly in a quiet and monotonous voice. - Stress and intonation are present but sound somewhat awkward. - Reads in two or three word phrases	- Reads with volume and expression, but sometimes slips into expressionless reading - Stress and intonation are reasonable applied - Reads with a mixture of run-ons, mid-sentence pauses for breath and some choppiness.	- Reads with varied volume and expression - Stress and intonation are mostly applied matching the interpretation of the sentence. - Read with good phrasing adhering to punctuation and thought groups.

Table 2

Scoring rubric for overall perceived comprehensibility

Score	1	2	3	4
Overall perceived comprehensibility	Reader is very difficult to understand: great effort is required for listener to understand. Errors are very distracting. Most words are intelligible.	Reader is sometimes comprehensible. Significant effort is required for listener to understand. Errors are often distracting. Words and individual sentence meaning are usually comprehensible.	Reader is mostly comprehensible: Listener can understand with some effort. Errors are occasionally distracting.	Reader is very easy to understand: Little to no effort is required for listener to understand. Errors are not distracting.

RESULTS

1. Perception Task

Figure 1 and 2 represents the results of mid-sentence pause score and sentence-final intonation score, respectively. Table 2 shows the average scores and gained scores from the pre-test and the post-test. Regarding mid-sentence pause score, the participants improved on average 10.29% between the two tests. The highest improvement is 58.82%. While 20 participants showed improvement of perception of mid-sentence pauses after the treatment, Participant 1 did not. It is also revealed that the post-test score of Participant 21 is lower than the pre-test score by 8.82%. Overall, the average score of mid-sentence pause from the pre-test and the post-test is 17.89 out of 34.

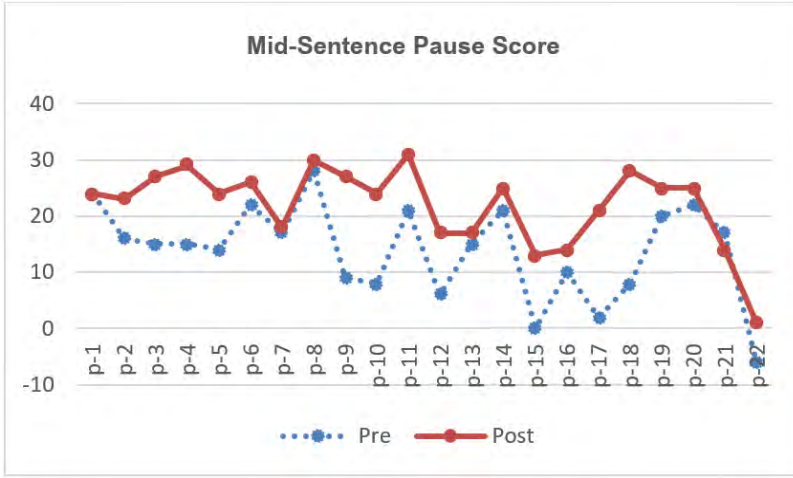

Figure 1 Mid-sentence pause score

The sentence-final intonation score is shown in Figure 2. Similarly, the average post-test score of the participants increased by 10.87% with the highest improvement of 30.43%. 17 out of 22 participants showed progress in reducing errors, while two participants made the same amount of errors in both pre-test and post-test. Surprisingly, three participants made twice as many errors in the post-test as in the pre-test, resulting in the lower post-test score. All in all, the average score of sentence-final intonation score from the pre-test and the post-test is 19.73 out of 23.

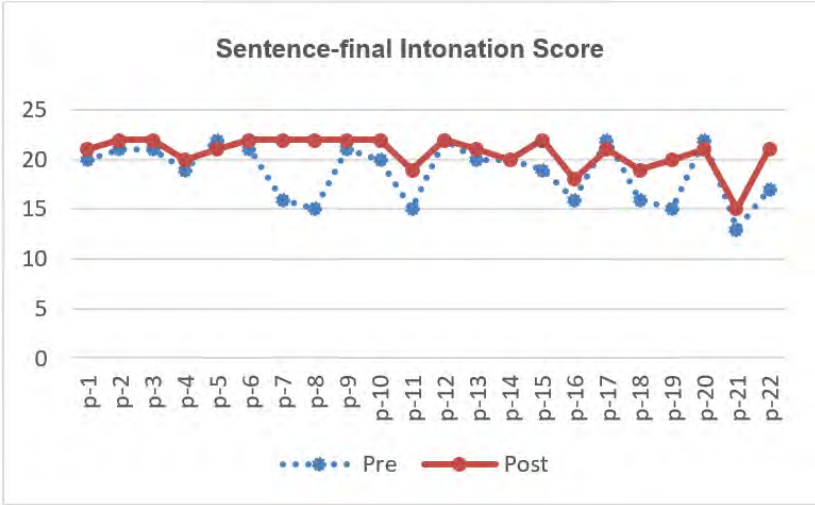

Figure 2 Sentence-final intonation score

Table 3
Gained scores between the pre-test and the post-test

Criteria	M	SD
Average mid-sentence pause score	17.89	6.90
Mid-sentence pause gained (%)	10.29	18.94
Average sentence-final score	19.73	2.03
Sentence-final gained (%)	10.87	9.53

2. Production Task

The recorded oral reading of the participants during the Production Task was rated by the native-speaking judges. The rating scores from the native-speaking judges were retrieved from a Google Form and presented in Microsoft Excel. Each rating criterion (overall perceived prosody and overall perceived comprehensibility) had a total score of 4. The rating scores from both native-speaking judges in each group were accumulated and divided by two in order to find the average scores of the pre-test and the post-test. As shown in Figure 3, the participants' prosodic reading, as perceived by the native speakers, made significant improvement between the pre-test and the post-test. There were, however, seven participants who did not gain scores in the post-test, and one participant earned the lower post-test score than the pre-test score. The results of perceived comprehensibility ratings were presented in Figure 4. In the similar pattern as the perceived prosody results, the perceived comprehensibility scores of the post-test increased from the pre-test. Although the majority of the participants exhibited improvement, five participants did not. Among these participants, one participant has already earned the perfect score from both tests. Furthermore, the scores of two participants decreased from the pre-test scores.

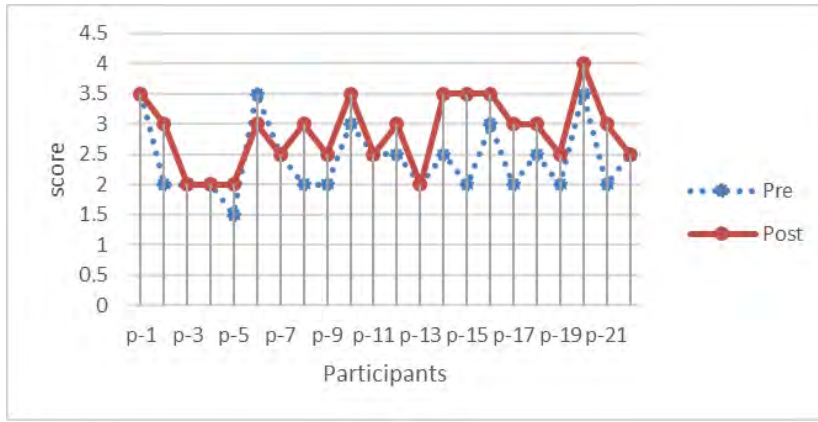

Figure 3 Overall perceived prosody

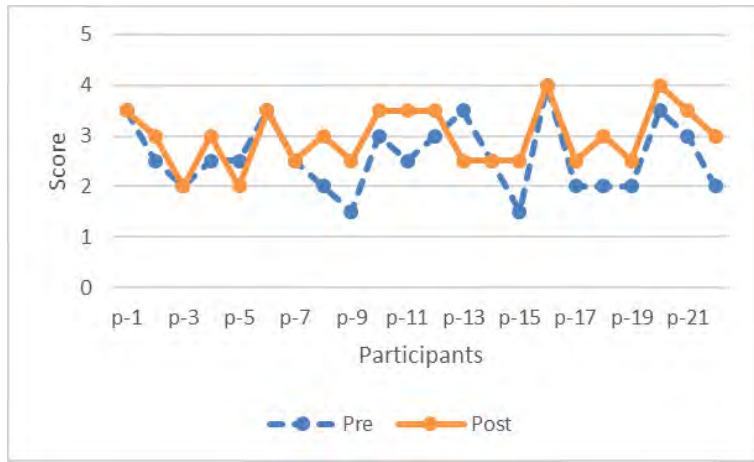

Figure 4 Overall perceived comprehensibility

3. Relationship between perception and production of prosody

To investigate the relationship between perception of prosody and production of prosody of Thai EFL participants, the average score of Mid-Sentence Pause, the average score of Sentence-Final Intonation, and the average score of overall perceived prosody were all analyzed using Pearson's Correlation Coefficient (r). The result revealed that the relationship between perception of pause and perceived prosody were very low (r= .0690, *p*= .76). Similarly, the relationship between perception of intonation and perceived prosody was very low (r= .0379, *p*= .86).

Lastly, Pearson's Correlation Coefficient (r) was used in order to investigate the correlation between the participants' production of prosody and comprehensibility as perceived by the native speakers. The average score of overall perceived prosody and overall perceived comprehensibility was analyzed. Contrary to the aforementioned relationships, the result revealed that prosody and comprehensibility had a strong positive linear relationship (r= .691, *p*< .001).

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATION, AND SUGGESTIONS

The results reported here suggest that RT did help increase the perception and production of prosody among the majority of the participants considering the improved scores in the Perception Task and the rating by the native-speaking judges. During the Perception Task, the participants admitted that they had not considered that marking pauses and marking sentence-final intonations would be necessary in reading aloud passages. The participants reported that they naturally perceived pauses at punctuation points such as at commas, full stops, and colons. Given the prior knowledge of pauses, the participants nevertheless exhibited mild frustration. It was later explained that some of them were not able to determine pauses due to the absence of punctuation. For instance, this sentence was identified as one where pauses were difficult to identify:

> *"This makes us wonder why the people that we want to love and trust always stab us in the back even when it means they will also be hurting themselves."*

This sentence is structurally complex and does not have the punctuation. It is a sentence that the participants frequently made pause marking errors. According to the answer key, the consensus of the native speakers assigned pauses at only two positions: 1) between 'trust' and 'always' and 2) between 'back' and 'even', while the participants who made errors would either mark pauses elsewhere or did not mark pauses on these positions.

Regarding perception of sentence-final intonation, the common errors of marking the intonation arose from the fact that the participants often identified the rising intonation with all types of questions. For instance, there were two WH-questions presented in the passage: *Why do you laugh? / What did you do that for?* The participants marked the ending of both of these questions with a rising intonation, contrary to the consensus of the native speakers who assigned the falling intonation to both sentences.

The RT activity provided the participants opportunities to practice identifying pauses and intonation as they did during the pre-test. The crucial procedure of RT is that, in each session, the participants negotiate and exchange their perceptions of pauses and sentence-final intonation with their peers before they read aloud the script together. I also assisted the participants by providing feedback and comments regarding the prosodic features and how they convey different interpretations of the scripts. Furthermore, the audio version of the script also assisted the participants when they practiced the script independently at home. After an initial struggle with the first scene in the script, the participants gradually became comfortable with prosodic reading as they proceeded to read through the entire script with greater ease.

Nevertheless, the fact that the RT activity was limited to one script which contains uneven distributions of sentence types may have accounted for low improvement rate of some participants. According to the results, one participant did not improve the Mid-Sentence Pause score and the other had a lower post-test score than on pretest. Upon further investigation, these two participants were assigned the role of the same character whose utterances contain

mostly short simple sentences. Had there been a rotation of the roles within the group or a new selection of the script, the RT treatment might have exposed the participants to various sentence types. Regarding the sentence-final intonation score, the fact that two participants did not improve in the post-test and three earned a lower score could be attributed to personal anxiety upon practicing the script. In particular, the latter three participants who admitted not having prior knowledge of intonation types were assigned the roles in which they had to apply both falling and rising intonations. Therefore, they might have anticipated applying both types of intonation during the post-test despite the fact that rising intonation in *The Scorpion and the Frog* was scarce.

Given the limited correlation between perception and production of prosody, this has implications for further research of RT for developing prosodic reading. This speaks to the need of effective modeling. As Zhang (2009) pointed out, "[…] non-native oral fluency could be obtained through efficient and effective input […]". In order to apply prosodic features in speech production, learners need a listening input that demonstrates what prosody sounds like. This awareness from the input may not always be transferred into symbols or marks as this study required of the participants in the Perception Task. Furthermore, given different facets of prosody, e.g. emphatic stress, contrastive stress, excessively long pauses, or extra-high intonation, which not only are difficult to be transcribed into symbols, but they are most likely subject to contexts and idiolect. Modeling, on the other hand, may be able to encompass these covert features of speech. When modeling is used as an input, learners may initially produce speech by mimicking the model until they reach the level of fluency in speech production through practice.

The strong correlation between prosody and comprehensibility highlights the importance of implementing suprasegmental pronunciation in EFL curriculum because prosody has proven to be one of the key factors for effective communication. Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016) argued that EFL learners may have good grammar and lexis knowledge, but they may have serious problems in understanding, and being understood, by native English speakers. They further discussed that it is because pronunciation is taken as an additional activity in some university programs, and that it is taught with greater emphasis on segmental features. In some cases, the lack of attention to suprasegmental is due to the misconceptions of learners themselves. As stated by Ur (1984), there are psychological obstacles in learners, where they frequently perceive their problems of miscommunication to be rooted in insufficient grammar and lexis knowledge, and that the goal of pronunciation is to gain a native accent.

Because Thai EFL learners and teachers are not strangers to the aforementioned situations, it is appropriate to propose that EFL teachers should emphasize the multifaceted functions of prosody in oral communication. Although there are various types of pronunciation teaching materials that current technology can offer, RT can be an alternative method for developing prosody if teachers want an entertaining and cooperative learning approach.

CONCLUSION

Among many interests in revolutionizing English teaching in Thailand, the focus on pronunciation teaching is currently receiving lesser attention. Empirical studies mentioned in this paper indicate that prosodic features, or suprasegmentals, play an important role in oral communication because prosody encompasses multifaceted functions that speakers use to convey different meanings. Although RT has been a popular teaching method used to develop oral fluency for young learners, this research study investigated the effects of RT, particularly on the development of prosody among Thai EFL learners at the university level. Given the results that showed the improvement of prosody among the participants, I am compelled to bring RT to the attention of teachers of Thai EFL learners.

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