

Improving the English Reading Prosody of L2 Learners Through Readers Theater

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to explore the effect of Readers Theater on improving English reading prosody with L2 learners. The process of how reading prosody is improved through Readers Theater was examined. Sixty EFL undergraduate students, non-English majors, participated in this 6-week study. Two cycles of Readers Theater were implemented. Using pre- and post-tests, reading prosody was measured by an oral reading prosody scoring rubric, which focused on phrasing, intonation, and volume. Results indicated that reading prosody received significant gains after the treatment. Repeated readings, group dynamics, and internalization were qualitatively thematized to shed light on the process of reading prosody improvement through Readers Theater. The implications of this study are also discussed.

Keywords: reading prosody, Readers Theater, reading fluency, oral repeated reading, reading aloud

Introduction

If prosody is the melody of language, then reading prosody is the melody of reading texts. This melody is not merely aesthetic; it has functions, and its functions go beyond just reading aloud and sounding expressive. Its dimensional indicators, e.g. pausing, phrasing, and intonation, assist the reader in making sense of a text (Kim, Quinn, & Petscher, 2020; Paige, Rasinski, & Magpuri-Lavell, 2012). Studies have shown that reading prosody disambiguates complex sentences (Godde, Bosses, & Bailly, 2020; Kuhn & Schwanenflugel, 2019; Paige, Rupley, Smith, Rasinski, Nichols, & Magpuri-Lavell, 2017). By using pauses to separate word boundaries into thought groups, readers cognitively grasp the meaning in complicated written texts (Veenendaal, Groen, & Verhoeven, 2014). In addition, reading prosody (i.e. expression), combined with reading accuracy and reading rate, supports readers in mastering overall reading fluency (Kuhn & Schwanenflugel, 2019; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Paige et al., 2012), which has the potential to springboard to reading comprehension (Godde et al., 2020; Fernandes, Querido, & Verhaege, 2018).

Furthermore, skilled readers use reading prosody to interpret the writer's intended meaning and emotions by rendering the text using different phrasings and pitch ranges (Kuhn & Schwanenflugel, 2019; Tsurutani, 2016; Veenendaal et al., 2014). As a result, expressive readers who exercise proper prosody tend to understand the subtle messages of the writer, leading to better reading comprehension. Thus, due to its aforementioned importance, achieving appropriate reading prosody is beneficial for L2 learners, whether emerging or experienced readers, for developing proficient reading skill.

In the Thai context, the teaching of reading prosody is still relatively novel, as it is not explicitly required in the basic core curriculum by the Ministry of Education (2008). In fact, the curriculum is aimed solely at accurately reading aloud different types of texts, such as news and advertisements (Tunskul & Piamsai, 2016). In addition, Lekwilai (2014) posited that Thai EFL learners are unable even to reach the level of reading fluency, because of a lack of reading practice. Similarly, a recent study from Intrarapawat (2019) showed that Thai English readers struggled with word phrasing and word pronunciation. They were not able to construct meaning while reading, which may reflect a problem with reading prosody and fluency. In Isarankura's (2016) study, she concluded that Thai students in higher education still displayed incorrect and inconsistent stress patterns of English loanwords when performing oral reading. Additionally, Isarankura (2018) reported mixed results in her study that investigated syntactic pauses while reading aloud among Thai undergraduate students.

With respect to overcoming these hindrances to reading fluency, all of the above scholars have implicitly come to one common conclusion, i.e., reading prosody needs to be enhanced in EFL learners, either through achieving reading fluency or through reading prosody instruction.

To date, reading instructional methods which have the potential to focus on improving reading prosody are rare (Kim et al., 2020) and deserve more attention. Among several possible reading instructional methods, Readers Theater has emerged as one means of improving reading fluency, which could also possibly promote the development of reading prosody for L2 readers.

Readers Theater, as the name suggests, is a method of using drama techniques that has transcended the theater, and moved into the reading classroom. It is used as a reading instruction that combines all three aspects of reading fluency into one practice and promotes reading fluency (Chou, 2013; Stokes & Young, 2018; Young, Durham, Miller, Rasinski, & Lane, 2019). Readers – of any age or level – are required to read passages fluently and expressively to an audience (Stokes & Young, 2018). Its explicit aim is to expressively and purposefully motivate readers to succeed in their reading performance. Its implicit goal, on the other hand, is to improve reading fluency (Young et al., 2019). In the L2 context, mastering English reading fluency has recently also been a critical concern (Lekwilai, 2014; Young & Rasinski, 2009). Tsou (2011) conducted a study on 60 elementary EFL students using Readers Theater to measure reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. In that study, reading prosody was measured broadly, using only phrases, reading expressively, and using punctuation. Myrset and Drew (2016) further investigated the use of Readers Theater in 27 Norwegian EFL young readers. Their results were primarily focused on automaticity and affective aspects, not on reading prosody. In contrast, Young and Rasinski (2018) confirmed the positive effect on reading prosody of using Readers Theater; however, this was in the L1 context. Another recent study in 2020 from Indonesia by Rahmawati, Rosmalina, and Anggraini (2020) claimed that, even at the university level, L2 learners still possessed only a moderate level of reading prosody, and many showed boredom and demotivation when reading long text passages. Lastly, despite the substantial gains in oral reading fluency through repeated oral reading practice with Taiwanese university EFL learners that Chang (2019) reported, his results were achieved apart from prosodic features.

Although considerable research into Readers Theater has been devoted to reading fluency, rather less attention has been paid specifically to reading prosody, especially in the EFL context. Moreover, little qualitative information has been collected that explores the process whereby a learner improves his reading prosody through the Readers Theater instruction. Hence, to address this gap, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the effectiveness of Readers Theater in improving prosody in L2 learners.

Research Questions

1. Can Readers Theater improve English reading prosody for L2 learners, and to what extent?
2. If so, how does Readers Theater improve reading prosody for L2 learners?

Review of Literature

Reading Prosody and Its Elements

In the broadest terms, reading prosody can be defined as “reading with feeling” (Paige et al., 2017). More narrowly, reading prosody is the use of prosodic features in the act of reading a text aloud (Kim et al., 2020) that convey the meaning of the text (Sabatini, Wang, & O'Reilly, 2018). Several studies have confirmed a correlation between reading prosody and fluency (Godde et al., 2020; Lekwilai, 2016; Schwanenflugel & Benjamin, 2017; Young & Rasinski, 2018). Prosodic elements, e.g., phrasing, intonation, stress, and loudness, can be used to determine the fluency level of readers.

Phrasing: Phrasing helps readers to group words into meaningful units, or thought groups. These meaningful chunks facilitate the interlocutor to comprehend the meaning (Benjamin, 2012), using the rhythm of speech, such as the syllable-combined length, position, and duration of pauses (Godde et al., 2020). Good readers use pauses to signal phrases, or syntactic structure, and string phrases into meaning. Their pauses tend to adhere to punctuation marks, and to indicate or highlight the grammatical structure (Godde et al., 2020). Hence, skilled readers seldom produce ungrammatical or unmeaningful pauses during their reading. On the other hand, less-skilled readers use frequent pauses sporadically, either inter- or intra- sentence (Kuhn et al., 2010), which interrupt the reading flow that the listener is normally expecting (Schwanenflugel & Benjamin, 2016). Additionally, L2 readers who read word-by-word or stutter also reveal a problem at the level of phrasing (Intrarapawat, 2019).

Intonation: Intonation refers to the pitch variation associated with linguistic and paralinguistic functions (Godde et al., 2020). Normally, normal pitch can be compared to a speaker's adult-like voice range in the target language (Kuhn et al., 2010). Appropriate voice pitch in syllables (or, stress) and at the end of sentences (or, intonation) is a sign of good reading prosody (Schwanenflugel & Benjamin, 2016). A falling tone will be expected at the end of a declarative sentence, and a rising tone occurs at the end of an interrogative sentence (Kuhn et al., 2010). Schwanenflugel and Benjamin (2017) monitored lexical prosody and claimed that reading fluently was associated with readers who used syllable distinctions clearly. By contrast, emerging readers displayed inconsistent and uneven word stress and pitch changes when they read the passage (Schwanenflugel & Benjamin, 2016). In sum, an adult-like pitch contour and accurate word stress in intonation are potential indicators of good reading prosody. In L2 readers, Tsurutani (2016) suggested that intonation pedagogy be extended to the sentence level. Isarankura's (2018) study also supported the idea that Thai adult learners may use their L1 phonological system to influence which syllables are stressed when reading sentences aloud in English.

Volume: In this study, volume refers to the level of oral reading loudness that is heard by all audience members throughout the reading performance. Often, skilled readers read with confidence, and thus have clearly audible voice projection (Young & Rasinski, 2018). On the other hand, struggling readers or introverted readers may not feel confident about reading aloud (Rinehart, 2001), especially in English. As a result, they tend to read in a soft, inaudible voice (Rahmawati et al., 2020).

Reading Prosody Assessment

In the classroom setting, rating scales are accepted as a reliable tool for measuring reading prosody (Kuhn et al., 2010). The Multidimensional Fluency scales developed by Rasinski

(2004) are dominant. However, the problem with these scales is the unclear definition of expressivity (Kuhn et al., 2010). In addition, the dimensions are constructed to monitor fluency, but do not directly measure reading prosody. Recently, Benjamin (2012) refined and reformulated the Comprehensive Oral Reading Fluency Scale (CORFS). Though its focus is still on reading fluency, the aspects of rate and accuracy are now judged separately from expression. Thus, in this 4-point scale, criteria that can be used to measure reading prosody have been developed. The criteria trace observable behaviors of pauses and intonation.

Readers Theater

Introduction to Readers Theater

Readers Theater refers to an expressive reading instructional method that requires students to practice reading aloud with expression to demonstrate, through a process of group work, their understanding and interpretation of the given texts, and which provides a meaningful opportunity for the students to perform their expressive reading as a group for viewers.

Readers Theater does not require props, costumes, nor sets, nor script memorization (Lekwilai, 2014; Stokes & Young, 2018; Tsou, 2011), as the primary goal of this instruction is to increase reading fluency in a fun and engaging way (Tsou, 2011; Young & Rasinski, 2009; Young et al., 2019). Students can simply hold a script while reading with proper expression for the texts. Its focus is solely on reading fluency, which also comprises reading accuracy, at the right speed, with proper expression (Young & Rasinski, 2018).

The underlying principles of Readers Theater are repeated reading, collaborative learning, and drama-based instruction. Repeated reading is the practice of reading and rereading the same texts many times, until the readers become automatized and are error-free (Shimono, 2019). The theory of automaticity (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974) states that the result of repeated fluency is to shift the cognitive attention of the learner to higher-level processes. Meanwhile, collaborative learning builds social skills (Tsou, 2011), and peer interaction raises cognitive, social, and emotional engagement (Dao, 2020), using the zone of proximal development and social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978). Drama-based instruction helps readers build confidence, motivates rereading with purpose, and ends with performing a script-reading naturally (Rinehart, 2001). Such drama techniques can also include theatrical voice training (Hardison & Sonchaeng, 2005), characterization, and script interpretation (Barton, 2016).

The process of conducting a Readers Theater gradually releases the students from a teacher-centered to a student-centered model. The procedures have been synthesized and divided into four phases, namely, prepare, preview, practice, and perform. In the prepare phase, the teacher carefully selects and provides texts that are meaningful and suitable to the level of the learners' proficiency (Lekwilai, 2014; Rinehart, 2001). The teacher previews the chosen texts and models proper reading aloud with expression, before allowing students to mimic the whole texts in unison (Young et al., 2019). The teacher also introduces new vocabulary, and elicits a summary of the reading passage (Young, Stokes, & Rasinski, 2017). The practice phase focuses on repeated reading in small groups (Rinehart, 2001), while the teacher acts as a facilitator and a provider of feedback. Lastly, at the perform phase, the students – holding scripts/texts – perform an expressive oral reading showcase in front of an audience. Finally, the students receive feedback from the viewers/teacher, and self-evaluate their own reading (Lekwilai, 2016).

Research on Readers Theater in L2 Contexts

Despite the predominance of research in the L1 context, studies on Readers Theater have been increasingly conducted in the L2 environment (Drew, 2018). In 1995, a research article from Lengeling et al. (1995) elaborated on the use of Readers Theater in the EFL classroom.

Since then, evidence has shown that Readers Theater can improve reading fluency in L2 readers (Chou, 2013; Drew, 2018; Myrset & Drew, 2016; Tsou, 2011). For example, Tsou (2011) highlighted significant gains in reading and writing proficiency and motivation in young EFL students. In Wu's (2015) study on implementing Readers Theater with 17 Taiwanese EFL sixth-graders, the results showed positive improvement in reading fluency and motivation. Myrset and Drew (2016) investigated Readers Theater with 27 sixth-grade readers in Norway, and discovered that Readers Theater fostered better word stress and pronunciation.

The aforementioned studies focused primarily on elementary L2 learners. Readers Theater research on a large class with young adult L2 learners has been scarce, and the focus often not directly relevant to reading prosody, *per se*. For example, Uribe (2019) expanded his conception of Readers Theater to include content-area instruction, and so, also attempted to identify the key teaching strategies of English of Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) that 18 elementary teachers used during the intervention. Chou (2018) confirmed the effectiveness of Readers Theater as a remedial instruction to increase oral reading ability and motivation for 49 freshman English students. Similarly, in the Thai context, Readers Theater has been combined with extensive reading, and used to examine the reading motivation of 38 first-year students in a six-week experiment (Srimalee & Charubusp, 2018), yielding higher reading motivation.

Methodology

This study employed a one-group pretest-posttest design. The Readers Theater was implemented as an intervention in a communicative English class for six weeks.

Participants and Context

Chosen by the cluster sampling technique, the participants were 60 second-year undergraduate students at one private university in Bangkok, Thailand, who were registered for an English class within an Events Management major as their core course. Of the 60 participants, 42% were females, and 58% were males. The average age range was between 19 and 26 years. The participants were in the same non-English major with mixed-ability proficiency. Prior to the experiment, all participants were informed, and agreed to be involved in the research. Signed consent forms were obtained in compliance with ethical standards.

Instruments

The research instruments were comprised of English reading prosody tests (pre-test and post-test) and learning logs. The purpose of the parallel pre-test and post-test was to evaluate the level of reading prosody before and after the Readers Theater intervention.

The reading prosody tests: Developed by the researcher, the tests consisted of two sections: a dialogue text and a narrative text. The dialogue section was designed to monitor reading prosody in a conversational setting. Speaker A was the pre-recorded voice of a male native speaker. The participants, who were Speaker B, were given approximately five to twelve seconds to read the assigned lines, depending on the length of the "B" texts. The purpose of pre-recording Speaker A was to minimize the bias that may have been caused by a test partner who was not always consistent in pitch and expression. Thus, by isolating prosodic variation to Speaker B, the study could produce more consistent and reliable data for analysis. The second section, the narrative texts, were extracted from websites, and adapted to suit the participants' proficiency. The texts were non-fiction, and related to general topics, with approximately 240-300 words in total. The tests were validated by three highly qualified

experts in the fields of linguistics, literacy, and curriculum and instruction. The participants' reading prosody tests were individually recorded by a rater/researcher to assess and evaluate the scores.

A reading prosody scoring rubric, adapted from the Comprehensive Oral Reading Fluency Scale (CORFS) (Benjamin, 2012), and including one additional criterion on volume, or the level of loudness, was constructed to assess and evaluate reading prosody. The rubric covered three predetermined features: 1.) phrasing, 2.) intonation, and 3.) volume. The marking points for phrasing and intonation ranged from one to four points, while the volume points ranged from one to two, hence, there was a total of 10 points possible per section. Since there were two sections in each test, the maximum score for the reading prosody test was 20 points in total.

The learning log: The learning log was designed to collect qualitative data for data triangulation and to answer research question 2. The learning log consisted of five open-ended questions, asking participants to describe their own learning experience and progress. Two learning logs were collected from each participant, one after each teaching cycle, right after the reading performance.

Readers Theater Instruction (RTI) and Lesson Plans: This instructional instrument was implemented according to the synthesized 4 P's steps of the Readers Theater procedure: prepare, preview, practice, and perform. Prior to the intervention, two reading passages were selected and prepared in advance, along with instructional activities. Two unit plans were developed for this study. Each unit took two weeks to complete, and consisted of six hours in total. The first 2-hour lesson in the first week covered an introduction to the reading material, new vocabulary, sentence structures, modeling, choral practice, and small group practice. Between the weekly in-class sessions, the participants were required to practice in groups outside of class for another two hours. Groups of four members were given guidelines for their expressive reading practices. They were also required to record their best reading practice in video format, and post it to a closed Facebook group. Finally, the week after was a performance session, which lasted two hours, and which included a final rehearsal and feedback from the teacher and audience. The RTI intervention was repeated for two cycles, or four weeks. Hence, in total, the instructional instrument in this study lasted 12 hours.

Procedures

The data collection procedure of the treatment consisted of five phases: obtaining consent forms, the pre-test, the Readers Theater intervention, the learning log, and the post-test.

The first phase was to obtain signed consent forms from the participants. Then, the pre-test was administered, using the reading prosody test in Week 1. Two cycles of the Readers Theater instruction were implemented for four weeks (Weeks 2-5). A learning log was given to the participants to complete at the end of each cycle. Finally, in Week 6, the post-test was conducted to assess and evaluate any changes or improvement in the participants' reading prosody.

Data Analysis

To answer research question 1 on the effectiveness of RTI on reading prosody, the data obtained from pre-tests and post-tests were quantitatively calculated. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and a paired-sample t-test were used to analyze the results of the tests to determine whether a statistical significance between pre- and post-tests existed with a level of significance of 95 percent.

As for research question 2, the individual learning logs were qualitatively analyzed, using content analysis, to explain the process of improvement in the phenomenon of reading prosody, and to triangulate with the quantitative results.

Results and Discussion

The results of the study were presented according to the research questions in this study, as follows:

Research Question 1: Can Readers Theater improve English reading prosody for L2 learners, and to what extent?

To investigate the effectiveness of Readers Theater instruction on learners' reading prosody, the data obtained from pre- and post-test scores were statistically analyzed. Mean and standard deviation (S.D.) from each criterion and test were calculated, and the differences were compared. A paired-sample t-test was conducted to explore the effectiveness of Readers Theater on improving reading prosody with 95% confidence intervals. The results are summarized in Table 1.

Before implementing Readers Theater, the mean score obtained from the pre-test was 11.13 (SD = 3.66). After the intervention, the mean score derived from the post-test was 16.50 (SD = 2.81), which was 5.37 points higher than that of the pre-test. The analysis from the paired-sample t-test confirmed that Readers Theater made statistically significant gains in reading prosody, $t(60) = -15.13$, $p < .05$.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of the English Reading Prosody Pre-Test and Post-Test

Reading Prosody		Pre-Test		Post-Test		Gain	t	df	Sg.*
Tests		M	SD	M	SD				
Total Scores		11.13	3.66	16.50	2.81	5.37	-15.13	59	.000*

* $p < .05$ n = 60

To examine further as to which aspect of reading prosody improved the most from pre- to post-test in this pre-experimental group, the analysis outcome is shown in Table 2. The participants in Readers Theater made the most mean gains in phrasing (2.87, $t(60) = -15.29$), followed by intonation (2.25, $t(60) = -14.32$), and volume (0.27, $t(60) = -3.26$), respectively. The results there showed statistically significant increases across all aspects (p-values $< .05$). Despite its improvement, the gain in volume was at the borderline of significance difference at 95% confidence, $p = .047 < .05$.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of the English Reading Prosody Pre-Test and Post-Test by Aspect

Reading Prosody		Pre-Test		Post-Test		Gains	t	df	Sg.*
Aspect		M	SD	M	SD				
Phrasing		3.75	1.76	6.62	1.35	2.87	-15.29	59	.000*
Intonation		3.73	1.64	5.98	1.62	2.25	-14.32	59	.000*
Volume		3.64	0.62	3.91	0.28	0.27	-3.26	59	.047*

* $p < .05$ n = 60

Based on the statistical outcomes, it can be claimed that the improvement in reading prosody was a result of the Readers Theater intervention. Thus, in answer to research question 1, the data confirms that the Readers Theater intervention does indeed improve

English reading prosody for L2 learners, and to a statistically significant extent degree. This result is consistent with that of Young and Rasinski (2018), which showed a large effect on their treatment group, after receiving the Readers Theater treatment for 2,600 minutes. Readers Theater, which focuses on reading expression, appears to contribute to enhanced reading prosody, as it is more than just reading aloud. Unlike reading aloud, Readers Theater requires participants to read repeatedly, with prosody and expression. The effect of improved reading prosody is similarly in line with the research of Hardison and Sonchaeng (2005), who claimed that emphasizing theatrical voice training for language learners can boost prosodic features, such as word stress, intonation, pitches, and pauses. The key element is reading expressively and automatically, which is also similar to the concept of reading fluency (Mraz et al., 2013; Rasinski, 2004).

Research Question 2: How does readers theater improve reading prosody for L2 learners?

To examine the process by which the Readers Theater enhances L2 learners' reading prosody, learning logs from the 60 participants were read by the researchers and coded to identify the themes. Three major themes emerged from the participants' learning logs: (1) extensive rereading practice; (2) peer dynamics; and (3) internalizing reading prosody.

The first theme proves the validity of the old adage, "Practice makes perfect". The students' answers in the learning logs revealed the salience of countless rereading practices. Most indicated that they practiced reading the script repeatedly until it became automatic, as one typical excerpt revealed:

"I read the whole paragraph first. If there were words I didn't know, I reread those words over and over until I remembered how to say them correctly." (S55, Cycle 2)

"I emphasized quantity. I tried to read as many times as I could."
(S6, Cycle 1)

The above two excerpts exhibit repeated reading as a key attribute, which later leads to reading automaticity (LaBerge & Samuel, 1974). In Readers Theater, readers need to read the same texts extensively, until they become fluent (as opposed to once, as in normal reading). As a result, reading prosody is enhanced with repetitive oral reading. This finding is in line with Godde et al. (2020) and Paige et al. (2017), whose studies asserted that the development of automaticity was fundamental to reading prosody. Similarly, Kuhn et al. (2010) and Schwanenflugel and Benjamin (2016) agreed that, after readers master automaticity from repeated readings, they can develop reading prosody. This result triangulates with that of Chang (2019), who stated that repeated oral reading could be applied, not only to primary, but also to university students, at any reading proficiency level.

Moreover, the majority of participants shared common answers on peer dynamics during their practice. The evidence showed that the Readers Theater process contributes to a jointly co-constructed learning experience. One aspect of peer dynamics is peer support, where members help members achieve their reading goals. Seeking help from other group members appeared to be a favored problem-solving solution, when facing reading difficulties. In most cases, less-skilled readers asked for help from the higher-skilled ones, while proficient readers showed a willingness to teach, and displayed patience toward struggling readers. In discussing this phenomenon, both sides explained:

"I asked my friend who is better [at English] than me to listen to my reading, and point out where I read it wrong, and where he didn't understand." (S35, Cycle 1)

“I taught my friends how to pronounce the words that they didn’t know. After they got used to those words, I made them re-read the paragraph over and over, until they got the idea of the tone that they should use while reading …” (S37, Cycle 2)

“[I] taught my friends their struggle words, so they could read correctly. It helped me learn how to work as a team, and be patient to wait until they could read.” (S1, Cycle 2)

Not only did stronger students help weaker students, but students of comparable skill level also helped one another, which was an equalizing process, as S37 explains:

“I practiced reading with my 3 friends [members]. When we said words wrong, we helped one another to correct [the mistakes]. If we did not or were not sure, we would look up the words on the application or use translation to make sure [we] pronounced them correctly.” (S27, Cycle 2)

By contrast, the other side of the peer dynamic could mean peer pressure, as well. When grouped together, weaker readers displayed indications of pressure from friends before the practice session. Struggling readers practiced reading ahead of time. Some used dictionary applications to check the pronunciation of words. The excerpts below, from S52 and S57, elaborate examples of peer pressure, which can drive readers to be accountable to the group for improving their reading performance, resulting in better reading prosody.

“I practiced by myself to make sure that I got my part well prepared before going to see my friends.” (S52, Cycle 2)

“I could not read well, so I used an application to help me read. My reading prosody was not good, [but] I used the application, so I would not be a burden in the group.” (S57, Cycle 2)

All in all, group dynamics appeared to contribute to reading prosody. Both peer support and peer pressure among members, regardless of vertical or horizontal supporting levels, to some extent, facilitated collaboration for prosodic success. This result corroborates the findings of Tsou (2011) and Lengeling et al.’s (1995) research articles on the use of Readers Theater in the EFL curriculum, which states that group collaboration can improve oral reading performance. In addition, Mraz et al. (2013) supported the idea that positive feedback from partners to one another, regardless of proficiency levels, could benefit better reading fluency and reading prosody (Kuhn et al., 2010). The finding also parallels with the recent study by Solmaz (2020), who investigated the collaborative reading experience for online L2 socialization. Solmaz (2020) asserted that L2 readers formed an informal community by which skilled readers assisted disfluent readers to mutually co-construct meaning from reading texts.

Finally, the theme that arises most noticeably from the learning logs is internalization. Internalization occurs when learners “develop the capacity to perform complex cognitive and motor functions with increasingly less reliance on externally provided mediation” (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 23-24, as cited in Abadikhah & Valipour, 2014). In other words, internalized learners can demonstrate an understanding of complex concepts, and can complete challenging tasks without help from others.

In this case, participants showed internalized reading ability by performing reading prosody using their own scaffolding. By comparing Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 responses, a

positive trend of improved prosodic reading was evident. Participant S35 gives us a good explanation of the internalization process. In his Cycle 1 answer, S35 remarked that his pausing did not get better. However, S35 reported improvement in pausing and overall reading prosody between his Cycle 1 and 2 responses.

“Mostly I still have a habit of reading fast. Mostly I stressed on the words and sentences that pass the period marks. But I learned to imitate reading from my teacher and friends.” (S35, Cycle 1)

“I felt that when I read dialogues repeatedly and understood their meanings, I gained passive reading skill automatically. For example, I know that when we read the sentence where I should emphasize at the right phrasing and pausing. The reading was flowing automatically when we read often.” (S35, Cycle 2)

These excerpts from S35 show that he internalized his reading skill by doing it several times, until it became natural. First, he relied on a teacher and friends, in order to read the script with the right expression. However, after a multitude of repetitions, he gradually accumulated enough knowledge and skill to read the script on his own without any help.

This phenomenon is congruent with Dillenbourg (1999), who wrote on the way that collaborative learning can establish internalization. He explained that the by-product derived from the collaborative process could be understood as internalization, or “the ‘transfer’ of tools from the social plane (interaction with others) to the inner plane (reasoning)” (p.11). In other words, the learner takes the tools that he acquires from the external environment, and brings them into his own personal arsenal of tools for achieving language acquisition.

In addition, internalization can be explained with the idea of revised psychomotor domains by Atkinson (2018). Starting from the imitating degree, which is highly dependent on the teacher, participants slowly move to manipulating, and then, to the articulating level, where they can evaluate the texts and read aloud creatively, based on their interpretation and the written context.

Other evidence also indicated the presence of the internalization process with the readers at different levels. As S5 explains:

“When the teacher helped me with the phrasing, I could breathe and read with ease.” (S5, Cycle 1)

“Now I knew when to phrase, pause, and stress in the sentences correctly to show the right feeling.” (S5, Cycle 2)

When using Readers Theater in the EFL reading class, learners have an opportunity to develop mastery of reading fluency. It can benefit both group work and individual readers. The more the learners read, the better reading prosody they get. Hence, the internalization process may be a factor behind the improvement of reading prosody.

This agrees with the results from the post-test data, which showed that participants were able to improve their reading prosody after a number of practices. Abadikhah and Valipour (2014) also asserted in their study of scaffolding and internalizing development that less-proficient learners enhance their linguistic features in the oral production form.

Conclusions

Reading prosody plays multiple roles in helping readers with intended meaning and reading fluency. It also helps readers to understand complex texts, and to convey the subtle subtext of the writer. The benefits are worth exploring in the context of higher education, where undergraduates have to read academic textbooks and extensive assignments. One method for improving reading prosody is Readers Theater. Our study explores the effectiveness of Readers Theater instruction on learners' reading prosody. The findings show that Readers Theater can be an effective way to enhance reading prosody for EFL learners. In addition, the contribution of this study to the field is to investigate the process of developing reading prosody that can be improved through Readers Theater instruction. Our results show that Readers Theater improves prosody through extensive, repeated practice. A positive and mutually beneficial peer dynamic fosters improved prosodic reading. Lastly, Readers Theater promotes autonomy and internalization, which assist in the amelioration of reading prosody in EFL learners.

Implications for English Language Teachers

The findings offer several implications for practitioners and English language teachers, at the university level, who plan to implement Readers Theater in the reading section of the course. Not only can Readers Theater enhance reading fluency, but it can also improve reading prosody in a large classroom, which is typical in Thailand and several other countries.

First, when designing reading scripts or texts, several factors need to be considered: word length, equal part allocation, and prosody-focused texts. Lengthy texts may demotivate disfluent readers; thus, the number of words chosen should be around 400-500 words in a large classroom. When the researchers constructed the reading script, we carefully allocated reading lines (in the dialogue text) and parts (in the narrative text) with equal part allocation. Each reading part should contain a relatively equal number of words for each participant to read. Ideally, the parts would be equally divided among 4-6 members, depending on the total number of students. Lastly, the selected content should be rich in prosody-enhanced sentences. A text rich in emotions, feelings, and dramatic scenes would be suggested for a dialogue script. It is also motivating and engaging for the readers to read in a way that is entertaining for the audience. For a narrative text, the teacher may feel free to add or modify the text to include declarative, interrogative, and exclamative sentences. Long or complex sentences can also sharpen a reader's phrasing and natural pauses. Such rich prosody-focused features should appear in each part, so that every member has the opportunity to practice reading prosody.

Secondly, as part of a Readers Theater lesson plan, participants can be required to record the best version of their group reading practice, and post it on a closed Facebook group. The benefits from posting the reading practice clip online are twofold. The first is to monitor learners' out-of-class practice and have evidence that they are indeed practicing. The second benefit is to monitor their reading progress, which is normally derived from group work and repeated readings. In addition, collaborative learning may occur both within the groups and between the groups, as weaker classmates watch the fluent groups perform their readings, and thereby see ways of improving their own work. Such an online practice video also serves as a soft reading performance, before the actual in-class showcase, which can then strengthen participants' reading prosody even further during the live reading performance.

Finally, modelling and feedback by and from the teacher can enhance accuracy, while promoting reading fluency. As Nation (2013) claimed, meaning-focused input produces meaning-focused output. In order to master reading prosody, students need to listen to the right input, either from the teacher or from an audio recording. Hence, the teacher should model the reading with care, and pay extra attention to oral reading prosody. At the same

time, the teacher can focus linguistically on reading prosody during the practice by giving feedback. Feedback should be constructive, and tailored to the specific problems the students encounter. However, common errors can be brought up to the whole class for time efficiency. It is also recommended that teachers be careful not to insist on an overly rigid model. In many cases, several intonation patterns are possible and could be considered correct. So, teachers should avoid conveying the idea of a right way and a wrong way. But, instead, they should encourage students to explore various intonation patterns, and use their creativity and their own background knowledge to find their own prosodic interpretation.

Limitations of the Study

The study was primarily limited by the number of participants and the number of class sessions, both of which could have been greater. A study with more participants, and which went on for a few more cycles, would have been ideal.

These limitations, however, arose out of the practicalities of the situation at the host university, in which the researchers were simply coping pragmatically with the real-life situation on-the-ground. Therefore, in that sense, it could be argued that the data derived, although limited, are a very realistic indicator of actual results that would be achieved in a real-world classroom, over a longer time, and over a larger data sample, with a larger future study.

The circumstances at the host university also made it impossible to have a control group, which was another limitation of the present study.

Recommendations

It is recommended that future researchers replicate this study with more participants and more cycles over a longer period. A larger study that proceeds over a longer time, with more testing cycles, and over a larger data sample, with a control group, would better confirm, or modify, the results of the present study, and would constitute recommendations for a valuable future study.

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