Teaching English Intonation in Thailand : Overview

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Abstract

Thanks to a widespread consensus about the significance of English pronunciation for successful communication, the main teaching and research interest has shifted to supra-segmental features along with segmental features. The ability to use appropriate intonation patterns is crucial, not only to improve intelligibility but also to prevent misunderstanding during cross-cultural communication. However, pronunciation is, like other aspects of language, complex; therefore, teaching pronunciation can be quite difficult for many English teachers. This paper focuses on teaching English intonation in Thailand. Factors recognized by research studies to determine the progress in intonation teaching are explored : inherent characteristics of the learners' native language, psychological constraints, limited exposure to the target language, and inadequacy of commercial textbooks with regard to an accurate approach for teaching pronunciation. The introduction of multimedia computer technology brings about software programs to specifically enhance intonation. However, the integration of software programs in intonation instruction requires a certain level of sensitivity and understanding of how intonation

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functions in context. Pedagogical implications into teaching English intonation are suggested.

Keywords : intonation, Thailand, English teaching, pronunciation

1. Introduction

English has played an integral role in Thailand as one of the major foreign languages taught in schools and academic institutions. Despite all efforts to improve Thai learners' English competence from all sectors, ONET results recently released by NIETS (the National Institute of Educational Testing Service) of Thailand showed that, among the eight subjects, Thai students at the three levels performed worst in the English subject (สถาบันทดสอบทางการศึกษาแห่งชาติ ๒๐๑๐). Even though the validity of the ONET exams remains to be estimated, the unsatisfactory performance of students in English across levels indicates that, despite efforts from all sectors concerned, English language teaching in Thailand has encountered slow progress. Therefore, immediate attention is crucially needed to improve ELT in Thailand.

Language teaching and learning activities have been developed based on the four core skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. With regard to speaking, two major components are recognized : segmental features (consonant and vowel sounds) and suprasegmental features (rhythm, stress, and intonation). The individual articulation and production of consonant and vowel sounds and their meaningful contrastive sounds required for effective speaking were once the primary foci of pronunciation activities in EFL (Jenkins, 2004). However, as noted by Morley (1992) and Chun (1998), with the movement towards more communicative, functional–notional and task–based approaches, this emphasis seemed increasingly dated and out of

place.　Recently, the field of English teaching has seen both renewed interest in pronunciation activities and calls for greater awareness in integrating suprasegmental features throughout the English language syllabus (McCarthy, 1991; Jenkins, 2004).

The significance of suprasegmentals or prosodic features has been empirically attested by a number of studies (e.g., Derwing & Rossiter, 2003; Jenkins, 2004; Levis, 2002; Levis and Pickering, 2004; Wennerstrom, 1998).　These studies have demonstrated that intonation, as opposed to segmental features, played a more substantial role, contributing to improved learners' overall intelligibility and perceived comprehensibility.　Derwing and Rossiter (2003 : 3) remarked that :

> *We do not advocate eliminating segment–based instruction altogether, but, if the goal of pronunciation teaching is to help students become more understandable, then this study suggests that it should include a stronger emphasis on prosody.*

Focusing specifically on intonation, in the last two decades, intonation has been recognized as having interactional significance, and failure to use appropriate intonation can lead to cross–cultural misunderstandings (Brazil, 1995; Gumperz, 1982). The ability to use appropriate intonation will thus not only improve intelligibility but also prevent misunderstanding from cross–cultural communication.　However, the inappropriate use of intonation persists even among learners with advanced levels of proficiency (Pickering, 2004).　Despite the role of intonation as a crucial and indispensable component of the English language, this component is slowly gaining substantial recognition and emphasis in English language teaching in Thailand as a major factor contributing to language fluency, competence, and proficiency.　As a consequence, a number of English language learners in Thailand find it difficult to be competent and confident in the area of English intonation.

This paper, as an attempt to improve ELT in Thailand, specifically addresses some of the factors that give rise to the slow development in teaching English

intonation in Thailand. Native language, psychological and cultural factors, and limited exposure to the target language contribute to the "mystery" of teaching pronunciation. In addition, commercial textbooks seem inadequate in providing teachers with an accurate model for teaching intonation. The emergence of multimedia computer programs has created a new chapter of teaching intonation; however, the utilization of these multimedia lessons still meets with certain constraints. This paper concludes with some pedagogical implications to improve the instruction of English intonation in Thailand.

2. Factors to be considered when teaching pronunciation

The following sections present some factors that are known to determine the success or failure of intonation learning. Individual factors are discussed, based on previous research findings on intonation learning, with regard to their advantages and disadvantages.

2.1 Learners' native language : Positive or negative influence?

Language professionals have always been interested in determining whether native language exerts a positive or negative influence on learning other languages. Many experimental studies conducted on the intonation produced by learners from different native language backgrounds indicate that the learners' native language is, to a certain extent, responsible for hindering the learning of intonation (e.g., Juffs, 1990; Lepetit, 1989; Luthy, 1983; Shen, 1990; Pickering, 2009; Wennerstrom, 1994, 1998, 2001).

Lepetit (1989), for instance, investigated how 45 native speakers of Canadian English and 30 Japanese acquired French intonation. His examination of intonation focuses on the domain of phonosyntax, where intonational cues correlated with syntactical units. The participants were required to read individual sentences. That is, the Canadian participants read 25 declarative French sentences, whereas the

Japanese participants read 22 declarative French sentences. The study revealed that many Japanese and English participants made errors in the use of phrase boundary tones in sentences read orally. The researcher concluded that the errors were due to many factors, including cross-linguistic influences.

It is also a truism that different native language backgrounds of the learners possibly impacts intonation production differently. For instance, the errors made by Japanese learning French intonation do not indicate that Thai learners will produce similar errors. Then, the question arises : What are some of the characteristics of English intonation produced by a native speaker of a tonal language, like Chinese or Thai? Shen's 1990 study focused on the Chinese learners' ability to both identify the French rising and falling intonation patterns and produce sentence-final question intonation. The results showed a fairly high level of accuracy in the perception and production of the sentence-final question intonation among Chinese speakers of French in orally read sentences. Shen's study seemed to suggest certain advantages of being a tonal language speaker when learning French. By extension, Thai learners might also benefit from being a native speaker of a tonal language with respect to acquiring intonation.

These studies seem to yield incongruent results regarding the influence of tonal languages on the target language learning, and more studies are needed to determine the role of the learners' native language in learning intonation. However, the research findings also implicate that, perhaps, in addition to the learners' native language, other factors are also responsible.

2.2 Psychological and cultural factors : Facilitators or inhibitors?

Learners' difficulties in learning intonation can be psychologically driven. For instance, adolescent learners might feel vulnerable when deviating from the norms imposed by the culture they inherently belong to (Clennell, 1997). In this regard, Gilbert (2008) even remarked that this embarrassment might be so extensive

that it is seemingly impossible for adult learners to master the target language intonation.

In a typical scenario of English classrooms in Thailand, learners are more or less homogenous in terms of their age group and cultural background. Therefore, age factor might not seem so detrimental, to begin with. However, the situation can be exacerbated especially in the case of mixed gendered classes. As demonstrated by a number of scholars including Tannen (1993), Crawford (1996, 2005), Cameron (1992), and Holmes (1992), men and women speak differently in many linguistic aspects including lexical items, exclamations, and intonation. Fernald et al.'s 1989 study, for instance, focused on how mothers and fathers who are native speakers of six languages (five parents from each language group) modified their speech to preverbal infants in their native language. The study found that, in general, mothers across languages used a wider pitch range in speech to infants than fathers. The results illustrate that gender can have an impact on the extent of prosodic modification.

The gender impact on the introduction production by Thai learners was also observed by Kanoksilapatham (2005). In this study, adult males of Thai nationality were asked to read a paragraph containing a number of intonation patterns. When asked to produce an utterance which requires the rising pitch at the end of the utterance (e.g., polar or yes/no questions) or after every pause in the sentence (e.g., a list or a series of items), these male participants were hesitant to produce the expected rising intonation. In the interview after the reading task, they confessed that they were aware of the appropriate intonation patterns required. However, they were hesitant to produce the rising intonation because such doing, for them, was quite embarrassing and intimidating. According to them, expanding their pitch range to produce rising pitch was one of the indicators of femininity in the Thai context.

This finding demonstrated that a degree of embarrassment about closely approximating the target language model can be engendered. Therefore, pedagogically, to improve Thai learners' intelligibility in English, psychological barriers and other

challenges must be overcome. Evidently, acculturation is one of the keys to success. But as we all know, acculturation is a slow and gradual process. For shy learners, the process can be quite painful. As a result, learners need focused support from instructors to successfully deal with pitch modification when speaking English.

2.3 Exposure to the target language : Quality or quantity?

Intonation is interactively meaningful (Brazil, 1995; Chafe, 1994). As a result, opportunities to be exposed to natural speech data are crucial and indispensable, positively contributing to the success of intonation teaching and learning. However, given the limited exposure to authentically produced input English, Thai learners find it difficult to be competent in intonation.

The relationship between linguistic input and output is clearly articulated and endorsed in the so-called "output hypothesis" (for more information, refer to Swain, 1995; Swain & Lapkin, 1995; Swain, 2005). More succinctly, receiving comprehensible input is not sufficient for language development. Learners require adequate opportunities to produce the target language. Based on the input learners are exposed to, they can formulate their own hypotheses about intonation. When learners have an opportunity to use language, they try out their hypotheses in their actual production. In so doing, the learners can discern if what they produce is as accurately understood as the learners' message is intended to be.

Currently, English has established itself as an international language, playing a pivotal role in all aspects of life : education, business transactions, and general communication. In Thailand, the dominance of English in the media such as TV programs, newspapers, and magazines is prevalent, particularly in the urban areas (Wongsothorn, 1996). Nevertheless, in other parts of Thailand, the amount of exposure to English input outside the classroom is generally limited because native speakers are not available or accessible for the learners. Moreover, a communicative need to use English to improve pronunciation for intelligibility is missing. As a result, the progress

of intonation development is unfortunately hampered.

In Thailand, teachers play a central role in a classroom of any discipline. Even though many attempts have been made to turn a classroom to be student-centered, as far as English teaching is concerned, teachers are still the principal source of the language input. Therefore, the limited exposure to the target language input produced by native speakers might be compensated by the presence of the Thai teachers in an English classroom. To exacerbate the limited exposure problem, it was reported that Thai learners' exposure to the English language is relatively minimal in the language classroom because Thai, not English, is used as the medium of instruction for about 80–90% of the class time (Puntakerngamorn, 1998; Wong, 1997). At this point, it seems as if nothing much could be done as far as the quantity of the target language exposure is concerned.

Not only the quantity but also the quality of the exposure to the target language culminates in a success or failure of intonation learning. A concern regarding the quality issue arises : How competent are these English teachers with regard to performing their role as a resource person in an English pronunciation class? Similar to the scenario in English-speaking countries such as Britain and Australia (Derwing & Munro, 2005), Thailand lacks prepared and qualified English teachers in general (Chulalongkorn University Academic Service Center, 2000; Mackenzie, 2002), let alone a qualified teacher with expertise in English pronunciation. The shortcoming is even more severe at the pre-tertiary levels of English education. A high percentage of Thai teachers teaching English (about 94%) do not have a degree in English (Kanoksilapatham, in press).

To help out these English language teachers, a number of training courses are offered by the Ministry of Education, Thailand, to enhance their professional expertise. However, most of the training offered has focused on the issues related to curriculum, and the four major language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and

writing, leaving pronunciation a marginal emphasis. These teachers, with little direction in pronunciation, thus have no option, relying on their own limited knowledge and possibly inaccurate and misleading intuitions in pronunciation instruction. This predicament takes the argument back to Swain's output hypothesis in asserting that the learners' inaccurate understanding of intonation is likely to be tested and, unfortunately, confirmed by the flawed target language input produced by Thai teachers of English. These situations culminate in an adverse and negative impact on ELT development in Thailand in general, and pronunciation instruction in particular.

2.4 Commercial texts and course materials : Life savers or trouble makers?

Because native speakers are not often available or accessible, heavy reliance on commercial textbooks as a resource for teaching pronunciation becomes apparent and indispensable. In spite of the trend that a growing number of teachers are turning their attention to prosody in discourse settings, unfortunately, a number of pronunciation coursebooks on English seem to neither accurately nor adequately address the significance of intonation (Thompson, 2003). To assess how inadequate the intonation explanations of the books are in preparing the learners to cope with natural authentic speech production in real life situations in the target discourse community, two pronunciation coursebooks are examined : *Sound and Rhythm* (Sheeler & Markely, 1990) and *Accurate English : A Complete Course in Pronunciation* (Dauer, 1993).

Among a number of intonation rules presented in these two coursebooks, three common intonation rules are scrutinized : intonation in a list of items or a series, intonation in yes/no questions, and intonation in WH questions. These two books are comparable in their explanation of intonation rules and can be summarized as follows :

Intonation with words in series : The intonation always goes down on the last item to show that the list is finished, and up on all the items that come before the last to show that there is more to come.

(1) *Would you like coffee, tea, or milk?*

(2) *Do they sell Hondas, Volvos, or Toyotas?*

Sound and Rhythm (p. 95)

(3) *I'm driving to Boston, New York, and Washington.*

(What are your favorite vegetables?)

(4) *Carrots, onions, and celery.*

Accurate English (p. 225, 229)

Intonation in yes/no questions : The questions requiring the answer "yes" or "no" end with a rising tone.

(5) *Do you remember her?*

(6) *Does he live in New York?*

Sound and Rhythm (p. 31)

(7) *Do you live in a dormitory?*

(8) *Did they leave yesterday?*

Accurate English (p. 224)

Intonation in WH questions : The "WH" questions end with a falling tone.

(9) *When did you come?*

(10) *Where is your daughter?*

Sound and Rhythm (p. 29)

(11) *When are you going?*

(12) *Who will you be visiting?*

Accurate English (p. 224)

The descriptions provided by these two books of these rules seem to be inadequate in many aspects. The textbooks confine themselves to presenting a minimal set of rules. These rules are exemplified by isolated sentences. The presentation of the rules neither allows the learners to examine intonation in contextualized speech, nor to be sensitive to how the context exerts influence on the intonation variation. When the language is presented out of context, most of the information concerning propositional content and pragmatic meaning, for instance, is missing. The learners are thus likely to be confused because the rules learned in the classroom are contradicted by naturally occurring speech.

Tench (1996 : 81) illustrates how such confusion arises; a counter–example against the prediction of the listing rule presented in the ELT textbook :

(13)   *I lost my passport/ my tickets/ my money/ and the letter for Mr. Tan.*

(14)   *I lost my passport/ my tickets/ my money/ that letter/ the lot.*

These two similar sentences can be accompanied by different intonation patterns. The textbooks prescribe how (13) should be pronounced : the rising tone indicates that the list is incomplete and the fall indicates that it is complete. However, on the contrary, in (14), the mid–level tone is chosen to indicate misfortune. The rule prescribed in the two textbooks is thus working, but in a severely limited scope. With such a simplistic set of rules as presented in the textbooks, there is no room for other possibilities of intonation. The learners are therefore confused when they hear an unexpected variation of intonation.

Furthermore, the intonation rules of yes/no questions and WH questions are problematic, like the listing rules mentioned earlier. In general, the falling intonation is associated with the speaker *knowing* something and the rising intonation with *not knowing* something. If this generalization is valid, there is no explanation why the questions (yes/no and WH questions) are accompanied by different intonation patterns. From the simplistic rules presented in the textbooks, it is impossible to explain such

a manifestation. In this regard, Halford and Pilch (1994 : 77) provide an example of how a WH question, said with different intonation patterns, conveys different meanings.

(15)   *What are you doing?*

Example (15) shows concave fall on 'doing', which in the particular situation conveys indignation and surprise and turns the question into a rhetorical one. A convex low fall in the same situation would be more neutral and more likely to be used for a true information question.

These examples are cited to illustrate that the rules presented in commercial textbooks fall short, and these shortcomings partly impede the progress of intonation development. These examples also demonstrate that natural speech does not always neatly follow the intonation rules in the textbooks. Therefore, it is possible that rule revision, or reformulation is essential for the communicative aspects of language to be integrated into language. Meanwhile, learners should be aware at all times that the choice of intonation pattern is determined by many factors, including syntactic structure, context, attitude, emotion, etc. The more sensitive the learners are to these factors, the more successful they are with regards to the mastery of intonation.

3. Multimedia instructional materials : Friends or foes?

Since the mid 1980s, technology including hardware and software for computers, particularly microcomputers has been integrated into language instruction, and subsequently has increasingly contributed to the enhancement of English proficiency in all skills. In this electronic age, the integration of computer-based technology is commonly known as computer-assisted language learning or CALL (for more information, refer to Warschauer & Healey, 1998; Warschauer & Kern, 2000; Warschauer, 2002). Currently, there is a huge selection of computer-based instructional materials available targeting different pronunciation aspects.

Chun (2009 : 177) advocated the advantages of multimedia software for the

following characteristics. Visualizations of pitch and intonation patterns (in the form of voicewaves) corresponding to the sentence produced by learners are displayed. At the same time, the native speaker's production of the same sentence is heard and displayed visually, providing learners with audio and visual feedback and allowing them to not only compare their production with the target but also replicate the target. In so doing, in alignment with Swain's output hypothesis (2005), learners have an opportunity to improve and sharpen their perception and production skills. Some software programs allow learners to record and manipulate their own utterance production, which can be very useful for testing purposes (e.g., checking and monitoring the learners' own progress and self-correction) and research purposes (e.g., determining the role of gender, age, amount of the target language exposure in the learners' intonation performance).

The general characteristics of the pronunciation software described seem to be able to compensate for the impeding aspects of pronunciation instruction mentioned earlier in Section 2. That is, in response to the native language concerned, the availability of the target intonation heard and seen provides the control and highlights the focus on approaching or conforming to the model or target intonation as much as possible. Therefore, while learners are cognitively and actively engaged in the multimedia lessons, the role of the native language, be it negative or positive, is likely to be minimized. In addition, because of the absence of face to face interaction between or among individuals, learners will not feel psychologically vulnerable or embarrassed to deviate from the cultural norms of pitch range imposed by their own society. Furthermore, this type of instructional technology provides learners with the accurate target input, produced by a native speaker. Finally, the intonation production elicited through multimedia materials does not require learners to consciously rely on intonation rules.

Despite a number of advantages offered by pronunciation software programs, certain shortcomings are not to be overlooked. First, the presentation of visual

representation can be quite impressive but might not be easily comprehended by even relatively more proficient learners, without additional help from teachers. Furthermore, the contents of the multimedia instructional materials are usually in isolated sentences (without reference to context), misleadingly suggesting to learners that certain intonation patterns are rigidly fixed in particular syntactic constructions. In fact, a simple one–to–one correlation between intonation pattern and a syntactic structure does not exist. That is, the same utterance produced in different contexts with different discourse intonation patterns can yield multiple interpretations, depending on the context being assumed. Clearly, not all rules can be possibly laid out for all discourse variation. At this juncture, it is noted that the technology and software available is still in the developmental stage, and the cutting edge of an important aspect of the program that integrates the diversity of discourse variation would positively contribute to intonation instruction, satisfying the demand for discourse intonation instruction.

Levis (2002), Levis and Pickering (2004), and Jenkins (2004) have congruently emphasized the importance of teaching intonation in context (contextualized classroom practice), preferably at a discourse–level, rather than within isolated sentences. Empirically, Hardison (2004) has shown that computer technology can help language learners learn intonation patterns if the computer tasks focus learners' attention on how intonation works within a piece of discourse. To elaborate, as learners become more aware of how these intonation patterns function in discourse, they can begin to predict whether intonation should rise or fall at the end of an utterance. Choosing the intonation based on the discourse can offer powerful explanations to intonation variation encountered by learners. That is, to be a proficient communicator, based on the surrounding context, learners should enjoy the freedom to make appropriate intonation choices.

So, what is the most practical intonation instruction to be offered in this era? First, although the utilization of multimedia lessons is beneficial, heavy reliance on them cannot be healthy. Indeed, they should not be considered a replacement or

substitution for classroom teachers. They are better being recognized as an "adhoc", supplementing or reinforcing what is instructed in the pronunciation classroom. Learners should be sensitive to the variety of intonation patterns used in diverse contexts and in other settings including listening to English news, watching English movies, etc. To help language learners to be successful with intonation, the learners should be trained to be "discourse analysts," taking context and the speaker's choice of intonation into consideration while being engaged in activities conducted through or in English. That is, intonation should not be limited to the classroom but communicatively extended and integrated into as many situations and language activities as possible. Through appropriate instruction and practice monitored by the teacher, learners can attain (understand and produce) a command of fine shades of expression, be conscious of how important the context is in determining the intonation pattern, and be more sensitive to other variations of intonation used by native speakers. Strategies such as self–monitoring and self–evaluation should be encouraged and empowered among learners if they aspire to more native–like pronunciation.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper primarily sets forth the reasons why intonation should be emphasized in language classrooms as an important part of communicative competence. This article also attempts to forge links between intonation and the mainstream language instruction. Meanwhile, language teachers should try to maximize the opportunities offered by technological advances. Given substantial exposure to the language input and enhanced sensitivity to discoursal intonation, learners should be able to form a set of criteria guidelines from which to extrapolate different situations. Then, the learners will be able to make valid generalizations from individual cases. Therefore, to master intonation, it is necessary for language learners to be able to continuously experiment and evaluate each communicative situation. They can always actively adapt communicative behavior on the basis of what they know about the

elements of intonation and their general functions. Above all, they can use what they know about a communicative setting and the interrelations between the ongoing communication process and the specific setting. The extent to which discourse intonation should be instructed to learners is, however, determined by their proficiency levels. For less proficient learners, basic awareness of the diverse intonation patterns should be raised. For more proficient learners, the ability to use the appropriate discourse intonation in meaningful speaking activities might be more beneficial and challenging.

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