Using a Role Play to Improve Stress and Intonation for Thai Learners

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Abstract
The purposes of this study aimed to improve learners' pronunciation focusing on word stress and intonation through a role-play and increase learners' ability in speaking English for communication. To achieve these purposes, 44 of the first year bachelor's degree learners majoring in English for International Communication at Rajamanagala University of Technology Isan, Nakhon Ratchasima were selected as the participants. The instruments of this study comprised pronunciation tests, an observation form, self-assess checklist form, and teachers and students' journals. The quantitative data were analyzed and interpreted with the use of frequencies, mean and standard deviation (S.D). The qualitative data were presented in forms of narrative descriptions. The results positively answered the research questions by showing that the target learners who participated in the study in English Phonetics Course had improved their English pronunciation in word stress and sentence intonation through the role-play activities. In additional, their active participations in learning process with enjoyment and confidence as well as proper gestures reflected their effectively ability in speaking English for communication.

Keywords: word stress, sentence intonation, English pronunciation

Introduction

English has being popularly taught equally one of foreign languages in Thailand for a long time. There are more Thai people learning English with various purposes, such as applying for a better job, studying and living abroad, or doing business with people from English speaking countries. To enter an international workforce, a working knowledge of English has become a need for Thai learners to achieve a number of occupations. To support this need, the English language competence and communication performance of Thai learners in a university's level should be improved for promoting, enabling, and developing them to obtain the greater opportunities. (Kanoksilapatham, 2007)

Moreover, Thailand is joining the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Economic Community (AEC) in 2016. So, The Nation (2012) explained that English is essential for Thai learners to communicate, contact, or work with many foreigners when linking with AEC. However, some ASEAN countries such as Laos and Cambodia are at better ranking in international English tests like TOEFL than Thailand. According to Educational Testing Service (2014), results of score data summary for TOEFL Internet based tests (iBT) presented that Thai reached an average score of 74, which was below the international average of 80. Although TOEFL scores represent only the data on the test takers that are not representative of the overall Thai population, the test score results can reflect the English proficiency of Thai students to some extents.

Recognizing the importance of English language competence, the Ministry of Education (MoE) of Thailand has a responsibility to develop learners' proficiency in order to support the change of global competition and workplace in the labor market. As a result, the current Thai syllabus focuses on the habits of the learners to become effective as 21st Century Citizens by following these five key competencies which are: 1) communication capability 2) thinking capability 3) problem solving capability 4) capability in applying life skills and 5) capability in technological application in the Basic Education Curriculum B.E. 2551 (A.D. 2008) of Thailand. These competencies are the outcomes of many research findings and the announcement on the Tenth National Economic and Social Development (A.D. 2007-2011), which spotlights on learner development for the future (Ministry of Education, 2008). To support the learners' development of key competencies, pronunciation is an alternative way to support the learners' communicative competence.

As a result, EFL learners should be recognized and encouraged by their teachers to acquire knowledge for the effective language accuracy and pronunciation (Celce-Murcia et al., 2000; Derwing et al., 2006; & Hahn, 2004). Pronunciation is a fundamental skill that students need because it affects comprehension and effective communication. Without it, communication breakdown can easily happen. Fraser (2000) found that English as a foreign language learners have a lot of difficulties with pronunciation. Therefore, to improve the learners' pronunciation, the emphasis on teaching correct pronunciation, for example, recognizing errors in pronunciation and correcting them is necessary.

In this research study, the role-play is introduced to draw an attention of learners to improve their pronunciation. A role-play is not only adaptable and enjoyable but it also meets the learners' needs. A role-play as a significant language learning

technique helps integrating parts of a lesson for learners' communicative strategies promotion (Ladousse, 2004). Considering the main cause of the problem with principles and the benefits of a role-play, the researchers consider that this activity is one of the teaching techniques to efficiently improve the learners' pronunciation and increase their ability in speaking English for more effective communication performance.

Research Questions

To improve learners' pronunciation focusing on word stress and intonation through a role-play.

To increase learners' ability in speaking English for communication.

Literature reviews

Speaking ability

According to Brown (2001) there are some spoken language features, which make communication performance easy or difficult for learners. First, a group of techniques that speaker requires to organize their outputs. Second, repetitions of speaker to make clearer meaning by using spoken language. Third, all forms of special problems such as contractions and reduced vowels when speaking English. Fourth, a variety of performances such as hesitations, pauses, and corrections in thinking process. Fifth, the listeners' knowledge should be good enough to get practice in creating the words, idioms, and phrases of colloquial language. Sixth, an acceptable speed that has to be fluently done by a speaker. Seventh, the most important characteristics of English pronunciation (stress, rhythm, and intonation) which are used to convey important messages in an interaction between speakers and listeners.

The Features of Pronunciation

To pronounce English language, Kelly (2011) claimed that people speak with using lips, tongue, teeth, hard and soft palettes, and alveolar ridge. The nasal cavity comes into present for certain sounds, and the movement of the lower jaws is also necessary. The articulation happens when the air stream is interrupted, shaped, restricted, and diverted.

Snow (2006) presented the features of pronunciation that it's not only teacher's role in making learners aware of pronunciation, but many students tend to think of pronunciation primarily as accurate production of the sounds of English words. Consequently, one way in which teacher can help student improve is by ensuring that all learners are aware of all of the important issues related to pronunciation which are; accurate pronunciation of sounds, syllable stress, sentence word stress, and sentence intonation.

Hudson (2000), Dobrovolsky and Higgins (2001), Ladefoged (2006) presented that the main feathers of pronunciation can break down into segmental and supra-segmental.
a) Segmental Features

Consonants are articulated with the obstruction of the flow of the air. They may be voiced as /b/ /d/ /z/ /v/, i.e., when there is a vibration at the level of the vocal cords in the larynx to produce them. While voiceless sounds like /p/ /t/ /s/ /f/ are produced without vibration.

Vowels or phonemes and they are precisely of three kinds:

Single vowels which are in order divided into short and long vowels, e.g., pen /pen/, girl /gɜ:l/.

Diphthongs which are the combination of two vowel sounds, e.g., right /raɪt/, boy /bɔɪ/.

Triphthongs which are the combination of three vowel sounds, e.g.,.fire /faɪə/, lower /ləʊə/.

b) Supra-segmental Features

Collin and Mees (2013) stated that in a more than one syllable English word or poly-syllable, it is said in strongly stressed syllable which will stand out from the rest. This can be indicated by a stress mark /'/ place before the syllable concerned, e.g., 'yesterday /ˈjɛstərˌdeɪ / , to'morrow / təˈmɑˌroʊ / to'day /təˈdeɪ /

Stress in the isolated word is labeled word stress. There is also analyzed stress in connected speech as sentence stress, where both polysyllables and monosyllable can carry strong stress while other words maybe completely unstressed.

Rhythm is often been claimed that English speech is rhythmical, and that the rhythm is detectable in the regular occurrence of stressed syllables.

Intonation is the pitch of the voice plays the most important part. Thus, intonation refers to the difference in the pitch of a speaker's voice that is used to communicate or alter meaning.

Pronunciation problems

Pronunciation is essential for effective oral communication because the listeners will misunderstand to understand what the speaker really intends to convey if a speaker mispronounces words. Therefore, it is important that words are pronounced correctly and clearly. Nevertheless, a number of learners in English as a foreign language are still encounter problems of English pronunciation, which result from several factors.

a) Interference of the mother tongue

One of the pronunciation problems of Thai learners of English is from the interference of the mother tongue. Khaeram (2007) found that the cause of pronunciation problem in speaking a second language is from people getting used to hearing and making sounds that exist only in their mother tongue. Many of Thai learners neither know how to pronounce English consonants and the vowels nor know how to use the stress and intonation. Also, the nature of Thai pronunciation and the lack of knowledge in linguistic properties of English sound have made their problems in English pronunciation worse.

Moreover, Zhang (2009) indicates that if the sound systems of a language are more dissimilar, more trouble the learners will encounter. However, it does not mean that acquisition of the new language pronunciation is impossible.

b) Consonants, Vowels and Intonations

Likewise, the study of Rintaraj (2003) showed similar problems of Thai learners in English pronunciation involving consonants, vowels and intonations. Furthermore, Wei, Youfu, Zhou, Yalun (2002), found specific characteristics of English pronunciations by Thai learners which are the final consonants of English words as unvoiced like being pronounced in a Thai way, the Romanization of the Thai language influences English pronunciation and, Thai intonations are applied into English pronunciations. Moreover, some Thais are shy to speak in a native English speaker's way.

c) Phonetic Differences

It is cleared that one important factor underlying pronunciation problems of Thai learners is the phonetic difference between English and their mother tongue. A research of Sayankena (2008) pointed out that some problematic sounds such as /v/, /z/, /dz/, /s/ and /z/ do not occur in the Thai language, so many Thai learners tend to use the most similar sounds to substitute them.

Correspondingly, Rintaraj (2003) found related factors for English pronunciation problems among Thai learners i.e. teachers' teaching styles, students' learning habits, the process of teaching and learning, and the classroom environment. All of these factors constitute in the English teaching and learning and influence their success in language learning in speaking skill.

d) Problematic English Sounds for Thai Students

Focusing on the specific problems of Thai learners on English pronunciation, the work of Poedjosoedarmo (2003) stated that learners of English in native English situation are believed to be able to acquire the language successfully from everyday situations. On the other hand, most of the EFL students in countries whose first language are not English may never develop their language ability to acquire an appropriate pronunciation in such situations.

Unfortunately, despite of demand to improve their English pronunciation and speaking skill, most EFL learners till struggling with some common difficulties in English pronunciation. Effective pronunciation can be reflected through two main concepts of pronunciation; improvable intelligibility and favorable impression (Poedjosoedarmo, 2003). To achieve this, teachers need to find the right way to help them to be able to maintain effective oral communication. Role-play is specifically implemented in this study to achieve this goal.

Role Play

Role-play was originally tried out in managerial training. The value of this technique as educational tools has been existence for many decades. According to Ladousse (1999) the process of a role-play can be crucial part of any language course because it is not an isolated activity, but an integral part of lesson in which it is used. A role-play is familiar for most teachers since it has differently been interpreted. Basically, a role play activity refers to selecting a dialogue which is extracted from listening comprehension, assigning parts to the students and get them read the dialogue a loud while a teacher helps correct pronunciation errors. In testing session, a teacher's aim is to imitate the model, and create the situations to raise more spontaneous speech.

English Speaking Evaluation

This study employs both Northern Essex Community College criteria for evaluating comprehension, and standard of Wongsothorn's for assessing fluency, gesture, and pronunciation during role-play activity.

Northern Essex Community College (2007) presented ESL oral rating form for evaluation speaking proficiency i.e. comprehension, pronunciation, and fluency. With focusing to the objective required for the subject, this study mainly focused on pronunciation aspect with these criteria followings; 5 = students create occasional mispronunciation of sounds and misuse of intonation, 4 = students make understandable pronunciation but it is always conscious of some mispronunciation and misuse of intonation, 3 = student's pronunciation and intonation necessitate concentrated listening and lead to occasional misunderstanding, 2 = students do any serious errors in pronunciation, word stress, and use of intonation so frequent repetitions are required, 1 = students speak incorrect pronunciation, stress and intonation and it is very hard to understand and 0 = their pronunciation are virtually unintelligible to the average native speaker.

However, only three criteria from Wongsothorn's standard, which related to speaking aspect, were evaluated. Criteria for evaluation are presented as follows: criteria for pronunciation; 5 = students can use native like pronunciation accent, 4 = students can communicate effectively with correct pronunciation, 3 = students pronounce wrongly sometimes, 2 = students pronounce incorrectly most of the time, 1 = students cannot pronounce and cannot communicate, criteria for fluency; 5 = students can speak naturally and fluently like a native speaker, 4 = students can speak continuously and naturally, 3 = students speak continuously and naturally but still has many pauses, 2 = students cannot speak continuously, often hesitate to speak and speak repeatedly, and 1 = students hesitate to speak, criteria for gesture; 5 = students can act out with proper facial expression, proper gesture and greater confident , 4 = students can act out with proper facial expression, proper gesture without nervousness, 3 = students can act out with proper facial expression, and gesture but still has less nervousness, 2 = students are nervous but can act out, and 1 = students are too nervous and cannot act out.

As this study focuses on enhancing learners' pronunciation for stress and into nation, the learners are expected to be able to pronounce accurately and fluently to gain improvable intelligibility and favorable impression in real world communication. Moreover, it is an advantage to prepare learners to become successfully effective with information, communication and collaboration skills in the 21st century life.

Research methodology

Participants

Participants were Thai learners majoring in English for International Communication (N=44) They are EFL learners at Rajamangala University of Technology Isan (RMUTI) selected by purposive sampling as a part of an English Phonetics course in academic year 2015. This group of participants was chosen because it is a mixed-ability group, which represents the population as a whole.

Research instruments

- Pre and Post pronunciation tests were used to see how students improve in learning intelligible pronunciation; they focused on word and sentences stress and intonation. The intelligible pronunciation tests were applied before and after the role-play. While the pretest taken at the beginning of course was used to identify their pronunciation errors by reading aloud while the posttest taken at the end of the course was used to reflect the progress of the improvement of the learners. They consisted of two parts. The first part contained 30 words taken from the initial study from relevant group of learners. The second part covered 15 reading sentences closely related to the content of the learners' English course curriculum to reflect the learners' ability in different intonation of informative questions, yes/no questions, statements, imperatives, and question tags.

The students' utterances during the role-play activities were recorded and then the video file scripts were transcribed and analyzed and co-rated by two native speakers to investigate the improvement of the learners.

- Observation form was used by raters to observe a classroom every two weeks. This observation focused on the improvement of the learners' pronunciation, fluency, and gesture while participating in role-play activities.
- Self-assess checklist form was used to reflect the effectiveness of the role-play on their language improvement.
- Learners' feedback form was used to keep a record and reflect leaners' opinions, feelings on their learning experience.

Data collection

Over the first semester in 2015, EFL learners were in a part of this study. The research started with the pronunciation pretest to identify the learners' problems. The role-play was designed based on their problems in relation to specific pronunciation features. Also, the observation forms, the learners' feedback forms, self-assess checklists were purposely designed to obtain the participants' opinion and to measure the progression of learners.

Data analysis

The data were obtained from different research instruments and then analyzed and interpreted quantitatively and qualitatively.

Table 1 Summary of data collection and data analysis used in this study

Research Questions	Data sources	Data analysis
1. Can role play activity improve EFL learners' word stress, intonation, and speaking ability	- Pre and post pronunciation test - Observation Forms	t-Test, Mean, S.D,
2. How the role-play activity influences students' attitudes towards the English pronunciation?	- Self Assess Checklists - Learners' feedback forms	Mean, S.D, content analysis Summary and narration

Results

Table2: the comparisons of the pre/post tests results for Word stress

Sample	Test	$\overline{\text{X}}$	S.D.	Score Difference	T-Value	Sigh (2 tailed)
44	Pre-test	70.09	26.51	62.41	- 19.12	<0.000
	Post-test	132.5	20.20			

The analysis and the descriptive statistics of the pre and posttest scores from the word stress showed that, the mean score of pronunciation pre test is 70.08. The highest score is 119, while the lowest score is 33, and the SD value is 26.51. Depend on these results, 30 given words in the test were taken from the textbooks they have to study in Phonetics Course, it is clear that the relatively lowest mean score of 26.51 proves that their performance on word stress pronunciation test is far from acceptable. However, after practicing 6 role-play activities the posttest scores from the word stress showed that, the mean score of posttest is 132.50. The highest score is 150, while the lowest score is 89, and the SD value is 20.23. It can conclude that in terms of pronunciation at the word stress level, the results showed that students significantly developed their ability in word stress. The finding supported by the finding that the students' pronunciation for both pre and post tests were 70.09<132.50. The result of the t-test analysis of the means was -19.12 with the significant level at p<0.000.

Table 3: the comparisons of the pre/post tests results for intonation

Sample	Test	$\overline{\text{X}}$	S.D.	Score Difference	T-Value	Sigh (2 tailed)
44	Pre-test	37.08	12.85	20.08	-16.79	<0.000
	Post-test	57.17	9.05			

The analysis and the descriptive statistics of the pre and posttest scores from the intonation showed that, the mean score of pre test is 37.08 The highest score is 61, while the lowest score is 19, and the SD value is 12.85. Rely on these results, 15 sentences in the test were related with informative, and yes-no questions, statements, imperatives, question tags, and lists of items which learners have to study in Phonetics

Course, it is clear that the relatively lowest mean score of 12.85 demonstrates that their performance on intonation isn't adequate. However, after practicing 6 role-play activities the posttest scores from the intonation showed that, the mean score of posttest is 57.16. The highest score is 68, while the lowest score is 38, and the SD value is 9.05. It can conclude that in terms of intonation pronunciation, the results showed that students significantly developed their ability in intonation. The finding supported by the finding that the students' pronunciation for both pre and post tests were 37.08<57.16. The result of the t-test analysis of the means was -16.79 with the significant level at $p<0.000$.

Aspect of speaking ability	Total	The average scores of the 1 role play	Speaking ability's levels	The average scores of the 6 role play	Speaking ability's levels
1. Pronunciation	15	25.00	Poor	65.83	Good
2. Fluency	15	28.33	Poor	64.16	Good
3. Gesture	15	17.50	Very poor, need improvement	79.16	Good

Table 4: the average scores of the learners' speaking ability rated by two raters

Table 4 shows the successful improvement of learners with regard to their speaking ability within three main aspects. It can be gathered from the table that gestures were the most developed aspect and then the pronunciation and lastly the fluency with the different scores of the first and the sixth role-play activities of 61.66, 40.83, and 35.83 out of 100 percent. However, if considering the average of all three aspects from two raters, the outcomes showed that learners' improvement for speaking ability is at a good level. This result also strongly proved that the role play activities effectively helped the learners developed their speaking ability successfully.

Table 5 Students' self-assessment checklists

List of questions	X	S.D	Levels of Agreements
1. Students can improvement word stress pronunciation	4.10	0.67	Agree
2. Students can improve intonation pronunciation	4.31	0.79	Strongly Agree
3. Students like roleplay	4.00	0.68	Agree
4. Role play can reinforce learners' understanding in pronunciation	4.15	0.62	Agree
5. Role play can reinforce learners' language application	4.02	0.76	Agree
Total	4.12	0.53	Agree

Table 5 shows a high level of students' agreements using role-play to improve their pronunciation. The average means of all items related to the impact of the role play activities on their language performance was 4.12 which indicated the majority of the learners strongly agreed that the role play activities positively impacted on their language development. In particular, the majority of the learners most strongly agreed that their intonation was developed most of all related aspects with the means of 4.31.

In addition, role-play can increase learners' understanding in pronunciation and language application which involved their ability to effectively transfer these knowledge to real life communication.

The result from the learners' feedbacks

The majority of the learners expressed that they enjoyed participating in role-play, especially with video clip recording, which made them feel free and stress, anxiety, and boredom. All learners are clearly stated that their pronunciation skill was much improved. They had learnt a lot more about how to pronounce correctly. Moreover, they were aware of how to use gesture appropriately to clarify the meaning of new words. In addition, they feel more confident in English speaking due to the knowledge and the skills about correct and appropriate stress and intonation through role-play participation. As a result, half of participants clearly expressed that they felt less anxious with their mistakes. They preferred communicative ways of learning a language with less focusing on grammatical mistakes.

Conclusion

Pronunciation

Although the learners had limited background knowledge of stress and intonation, they became highly aware of the importance of them. At the beginning of the course, almost all of them did not know how to pronounce correctly. However, they became interested in learning how to pronounce English stress and intonation correctly. The more the role-play were used for enhancing their speaking performance, the more they put effort to learn. If compared their performance between the beginning and the end of the course, it could be obviously seen that the longer the learners involved in the role play activities, the better their pronunciation performance. Moreover, all of them had shown higher confidence with great enjoyment during actively participating in the role-play activities throughout the course.

Fluency

At the beginning of the course, the learners were so nervous that almost all of them forgot what they had to speak. The nervousness and shyness made them hesitate to utter with many pauses. On the contrary, the longer they engaged in the role-play activities, the more fluently with fewer pauses they could speak. Obviously, they could speak with better pronunciation with higher confidence through their clearer, louder voice and proper gestures. Although they could not speak with a native like pronunciation and accents, all of them could communicate effectively through an intelligible speech with more confidence and natural speed.

Gesture

Almost all the learners were so shy that they could not act out properly according to their role especially the first play role. They could not concentrate on their scripts, their turns, and their actions. They could not use proper facial expression and gestures during participating in the activities. On the opposite, at the end of the course, all of them could act out naturally with more confidence due to motivating and enjoyable

practices. The great experience they gained during the course, the higher confident they become in speaking English naturally with the stronger awareness of correct stress and intonation. In summary, they had improved their gestures for successful oral communication.

Discussion

Generally, it was clear that the learners had higher improvement in gestures and pronunciation than fluency. This might be because the majority of them claimed that they enjoyed and actively participating in their role play activities with more and more confidence in speaking with correct and appropriated stress and intonation. However, to become fluent in speaking English, it took longer time. They had only six role-plays for practice.

Moreover, the research findings clearly showed that guided role-play activity helped enhance learners' language improvement in learning to speak English. Some better learners who needed to become more autonomous learners stated that they should provided with free choices to choose their roles and to create their scripted. One of the best way to promote autonomous learners and complete transfer of knowledge and skills acquired during the course was to allow learners to have more opportunities to select their own role and create their own situations.

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