Reader's Theater: An Alternative Tool to Develop Reading Fluency among Thai EFL learners

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Abstract

Fluency in reading is critical for becoming a successful reader and strongly correlates with reading comprehension. Fluency in reading refers to appropriate reading speed, accurate word recognition, appropriate phrasing, and appropriate expression when reading orally. Reader's Theater (RT) is a reading instructional method that requires readers to read aloud from scripts. It is recognized as a method that helps develop reading fluency of L1 and ESL/EFL learners of different levels of proficiency. RT also incentivizes and persuades learners to re-read the same text several times. This paper will explore the benefits of RT as well as suggestions about how it could be applied as an alternative tool for fluency instructions in the Thai EFL context.

Keywords: Reader's Theater, reading fluency, L2 reading, reading instruction

Introduction

Reading is regarded as a complex process which involves the readers, the text, and the interaction between the reader and the text (Rumelhart, cited in Aebersold & Field, 2001). Reading involves not only the linguistic knowledge of the language of the text, but also the psychology of a reader. In order to construct the intended meaning of the text, an efficient reader tends to rely on his/her preconceptions about the language of the text as well as his/her prior knowledge and past experience related to the text (Mikulecky, 2008; Aebersold & Field, 2001). The process in which a reader employs his/her linguistic knowledge to comprehend the text is called the "bottom-up" process. Conversely, a reader possesses background knowledge and experience which is brought upon reading the text (schema). The process in which a reader approaches the text with his/her schema in order to find a match with his/her expectations, assumptions, and predictions is called the "top-down" process. The bottom-up and top-down processes do not occur independently of each other. Rather, both processes occur either alternately or simultaneously, depending on the type of text and the reader's background knowledge, language proficiency level, motivation, strategy use, and culturally shaped beliefs about the reading (Aebersold & Field, 2001).

In 2000, the National Reading Panel, a United States government body derived from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) pin-pointed the five essential components of reading. These components have been reported to be beneficial for teaching reading to L1 learners and ESL/EFL learners alike (Tindall & Nisbet, 2010). These critical components are: 1) *Phonemic awareness*: the knowledge of individual sounds that create words, 2) *Phonics*: the understanding of the relationship between symbols (letters) and spoken sounds to decode words, 3) *Vocabulary*: the knowledge of words, their meaning and context, 4) *Fluency*: the ability to read with

appropriate rate, phrasing, accuracy, and expression, and 5) *Comprehension*: the understanding of meaning of the text, acquired by reading strategies (National Reading Panel, 2000; Tindall & Nisbet, 2010).

Given these components of reading, fluency remains a foreign concept in many language instructional contexts. While much traditional reading instruction focuses on word identification strategies to foster comprehension, fluent reading instruction is often dismissed by instructors. Despite the fact that fluency was introduced by Allington back in 1983, it was the National Reading Panel's identification of the five reading components that triggered interest in fluency (Allington, 2006). Recently, researchers agree that fluency in reading is a key to becoming a successful and competent reader (Rasinski & Padak, 2000; Taguchi, Takayasu-Mass & Gorsuch, 2004; Trainin & Andrzejczak, 2006). Among several instructional strategies used to develop learners' fluency is Readers' Theater (RT).

In Thailand's EFL situation, fluency is not recognized in language instruction, which is evident by the absence of research addressing reading fluency. There are, however, several studies that focus on strategies to improve reading skills. Nonetheless, poor reading ability is found in students at all educational levels from primary schools to universities. Research also found that even Thai postgraduate students are having difficulties in reading when they continue their studies abroad (Bell, 2011). The problem lies upon the fact that Thai EFL students do not frequently read English texts outside of class. The only time that students read in English is in the classroom where teachers will direct them to read, help them make sense of the text, and complete reading exercises. Some students may eventually manage to comprehend the text, but they may not be motivated to read any other text unassigned by teachers, let alone reading English books in their free time for pleasure. Given that reading is like any other skill

that needs practice in order to become fluent, most Thai students are not fluent readers due to the fact that they lack practice.

This paper will discuss the characteristics and the importance of fluency, as well as the role of RT as an instructional method to develop fluency. Finally, a reflection of fluency instruction and RT application to the Thai EFL reading curriculum will be discussed.

Fluency and the relationship with comprehension

Like any other skill, reading requires frequent practice so that a reader can become fluent. Fluency is realized when the task is done at the level of automaticity. Automaticity refers to *speed, effortlessness, autonomy,* and *lack of conscious awareness* (Logan, 1997). According to Logan (1997), speed is important to automaticity because it reduces time to react, and it can be increased through practice. Effortlessness indicates automaticity as tasks can be done with ease and without interference. Automaticity in tasks is autonomous; tasks can be done without intention. Lastly, automaticity does not require conscious awareness of the involved process while doing it.

Fluency in reading involves automaticity at word level and automaticity at text level. Automaticity in word recognition occurs when the reader possesses awareness of components of words such as letters, sounds and stresses, and is able to read *rapidly* and *correctly* identify words. This is indicated by the reading rate and accuracy of reading. Automaticity at text level is when the reader reads with appropriate *phrasing* and *prosody (expression).*

Researchers agreed that fluency has a strong correlation with comprehension (Callard, 2008; Trainin & Andrzejczak, 2006; Hudson, Lane & Pullen, 2005; Nation, 2005; Hook & Jones, 2004; Taguchi, Takayasu-Mass & Gorsuch, 2004; Rasinski & Padak, 2000). First of all, without appropriate reading speed, readers may exhibit signs of fixation (fixing their eyes on words, parts of words,

or individual letters) and regression (looking back at what has already been read) (Nation, 2009), which are attributes of poor word recognition skills. Secondly, though readers appear to read quickly, they may exhibit inappropriate phrasing that affects the reader in dealing with larger units of words and thus causes confusion when the reader cannot see the relationship of each word unit in a sentence (Hudson, Lane & Pullen, 2005). Lastly, without appropriate expression or prosodic features present in reading, it may reflect the reader's lack of understanding of what is being read. The latter two are evident of poor text level automaticity.

It remains inconclusive, however, whether fluency precedes development of comprehension or it is comprehension that produces fluency (Applegate, Applegate & Modla, 2009; Keehn, Harmon & Shoho, 2008; Hudson, Lane & Pullen, 2005). It is conceivable that the relationship between fluency and comprehension is reciprocal rather than uni-directional (Tyler & Chard, 2000). In the light of the close relationship between the two, many researchers believe that fluency should not be neglected in reading instruction.

Given the empirical research of the close relationship between fluency and comprehension, there is a debate about how to develop fluency, either by oral reading or silent reading methods, and about which is the best predictor of comprehension. Supporters of silent reading argue that it is possible for readers to read the text aloud and fluently and not to comprehend it (Mikulecky, 2008; Cole, 2004), and moreover that oral reading may be a distraction impeding comprehension.

Nevertheless, there is little support for these claims, and there are relatively few studies concerning silent reading fluency at all. There are, on the other hand, more studies on oral reading. Since the components of fluency, namely reading speed, accuracy in word recognition, and phrasing are easier to observe through reading aloud, and the other component – prosody or expression –

can obviously only be assessed by reading aloud, most researchers may not take silent reading into account for assessing fluency instruction.

We should, however, note that fluency and comprehension is a complex dynamic. What is more important is that oral reading needs to be implemented in reading instruction at the early stages of learning since it allows the instructor to diagnose and improve students' reading fluency in a timely manner. As students' oral fluency is developed through time, and the text types they encounter become various and more complex, silent reading can be emphasized in reading instruction. Rasinski et al. (2011) stated that, "although fluency is normally considered within the domain of oral reading, silent reading fluency [is] a salient concept in reading."

How to develop fluency

The idea of developing fluency is better illustrated by the analogy between a professional musician and a proficient reader. A musician takes years of practice in order to master an instrument. She may start practicing an instrument at a young age and spend several hours a day doing it. Every day she plays the instrument with a piece of music, and does it repeatedly until she can play it smoothly. She then moves on to more difficult notes and spends less time to play smoothly. A proficient reader reads very frequently and consistently. She may start with books that are easy to read, and reads them several times before she chooses books that are more difficult.

This analogy suggests that repeated activity can enhance fluency. In order to develop fluency in reading, the reader needs frequent reading practice. Allington (2006) stated that one of the fundamental problems that a disfluent reader has to face is limited reading practice. As stated earlier, readers can increase automaticity in decoding words at sight and become faster at

reading through practice. For other aspects of fluency, namely phrasing and prosodic features, they can be analyzed through oral reading (Rasinski & Padak, 2000)

Given that the major components of fluency are reading speed, accuracy, phrasing and prosody, and that fluency is achieved by substantial amounts of practice, several instructional strategies are launched to develop these components. Among those strategies, Repeated Reading (RR) has been researched and proven to be effective in enhancing reading fluency (Samuels, 1979; Tyler & Chard, 2000; Hudson, Lane & Pullen, 2005). The technique is as simple as it sounds: a reader reads a short and meaningful passage several times until a satisfactory level of reading rate and word accuracy is reached. The instructor counts how many words were read (words per minute – WPM), and how many words were read correctly (correct words per minute – CWPM) (Samuels, 1979). The technique then repeats again with a different passage. Tyler and Chard (2000) reported that RR helps a reader increase reading rate and accuracy and ability to segment text into meaningful chunks (Dowhower, cited in Tyler & Chard, 2000).

There are, however, opponents to RR that say it may not be suitable for developing all areas of reading fluency. While RR appears to focus on increase of reading speed, accurate word recognition skill, expression, and prosody are not emphasized. Moreover, some learners may be frustrated by the apparent absurdity of re-reading the same text over and over, which can jeopardize their motivation in reading (Tyler & Chard, 2000; Nation, 2009).

This is when Reader's Theater (RT) garnered lots of attention among recent studies of fluency instruction. The reasons are that RT provides meaningful context for repeated reading practice, and it has been proven to improve all areas of reading fluency whereas

repeated reading does not. Most importantly, RT is a fun activity that creates motivation and joy to read for students.

What is reader's theater and how does it work?

RT is an instructional method that requires students to orally perform reading from scripts. As it is another form of RR, RT allows students to re-read the text several times for the purposes of rehearsing. Basically, RT requires students to read a play script out loud. It works in a similar way to a staged play, except that it does not require props, costumes, or stage productions. Actors in RT do not memorize the lines. They simply use scripts and vocal expression to tell and understand a story (Willcutt, 2007). To perform for their audience in a comprehensive and entertaining way, students need to practice reading their parts in the script several times to make sure that they read fluently enough to be understood by the audience, and they should be able to read with appropriate expressions to visualize the imagined props, settings and actions, and to make their performance entertaining with the emotions and feelings of the characters.

RT is conducted by the following steps:

1. *Text selection*: the instructor chooses a script at the student's instructional level. Several scripts made specifically for RT are widely available. Alternatively, the instructor can adapt his/her own scripts from books and other literature.
2. *Modeling*: the instructor reads aloud the script for students to demonstrate what fluent reading should be like. If an audio version of the script is available, the instructor can play it.
3. *Discussion*: discuss the plot, characters, settings, etc. with students. Vocabulary and sentence structures can be discussed as well to ensure comprehension.

4. *Assign roles*: divide students into groups and assign roles to them. When students are familiar with RT, the instructor may let them choose their roles.

5. *Practice*: students practice the role with their peers, and sometimes practice by themselves. Upon practicing the script, it will take both silent and oral reading for students.

6. *Feedback and comment*: after students practice reading the script aloud, the instructor gives feedback and comments for improvement.

7. *Perform*: students stand in front of the class and perform the script.

RT activities are well-received by researchers and instructors for a number of reasons. In terms of the relationship with fluency, RT helps increase reading speed and word accuracy, as it works the same way as RR. Martinez, Roser and Strecker (2002) conducted a 10-week RT project with second grade students, and they found that the second graders increased their reading speed by 17 words per minute on average. The researchers concluded that RT offers "an incentive for returning to the text again and again" (Martinez, Roser & Strecker, 2002) and that it promotes oral reading fluency. Likewise, Corcoran and Davis (2005) in their study of second and third grade students with learning disabilities found that the number of words read correctly per minute increased substantially after RT instruction. Significant growth in expression in reading was also observed in the study of Keehn, Harmon and Shoho (2008). They pointed out that modeling of prosodic and expressive reading by the teacher during RT instruction resulted in "more expressive oral reading by students".

Most significantly, RT fosters comprehension since it encourages students to be engaged in negotiating the meaning of the text, exchanging their interpretation of the text, and generating responses to the text through performance (Liu, 2000). Studies of RT in both L1 and ESL/EFL classrooms (e.g. Visser &

Edge, 2013; Kariuk & Rhymer, 2012; Keehn, Harmon & Shoho, 2008; Patrick, 2008) indicate that comprehension of students instructed with RT methods increased significantly by comparison to those who are not instructed with RT.

Apart from the effects on reading fluency, RT has significant impacts on students' learning behaviors. Overwhelmingly, the research consistently agrees that RT is an incentive activity (Alspach, 2010; Haws, 2008; Martinez, Roser & Strecker, 2002) that persuades students to enjoy re-reading the same text several times and creates motivation and confidence in readers (McKay, 2008; Keehn, Harmon & Shoho, 2008; Rinehart, 1999). By performing reading to an audience, readers automatically feel engaged to be fluent in order to deliver the message and entertain the audience at the same time. Moreover, RT supports peer learning among students. Students with reading disabilities usually feel intimidated finding themselves dealing with reading alone. RT allows students to interact with their peers by providing various roles for a group to share. Hence, it calls for active participation by all group members as each member is responsible for each part in the script, and students therefore become more engaged than they do with other typical reading assignments (Tyler & Chard, 2000).

Although RT is suitable for both L1 and ESL/EFL students of all ages and of all levels of proficiency, the majority of research on RT focuses on young learners from elementary to 12th grade (and mostly between 2nd to 4th grade). It is possible that it results in the belief that fluency should be implemented at the early stages of learning.

There is little research concerning the application of RT to adult learners and college students. Interestingly, when applying RT to learners beyond K-12 levels, RT appeared to extend to other skills such as writing (e.g. Liu, 2000) and communication skills (e.g. Patrick, 2008). The former study reported that students who

performed reading aloud not only gained reading fluency, but also practiced writing skills by writing responses and conclusions to the text. The latter also focuses on students writing their own script, but with the purpose of enhancing communication skills.

Current situation of reading instruction in the Thai EFL context

Very little research is known to address fluency in Thailand's EFL reading curriculum. On the other hand, there are a number of studies that involve reading strategies (e.g. Noicharoen, 2012; Siriphanich, 2010; Oranpattanachai, 2010; Chawwang, 2008). Such strategies as decoding, dealing with complex sentence structures, and using graphic organizers are claimed to foster comprehension. Other researchers (e.g. Wichadee, 2011; Sitthiprom, 2012) promote strategies such as metacognitive strategies that do not rely on students' linguistic ability, but instead on their own thinking ability. These studies usually consider students' success in reading from *how much* they comprehend the text, which is usually determined by the test scores, rather than *how* they read to achieve comprehension.

Indeed, strategy training seems to work well with improving Thai students' reading ability. Ultimately, however, learners will have to rely on these strategies in order to get by each reading text. It may turn out that reading instruction is all about knowing and using a series of strategies as learning tools instead of dealing with the text by simply reading it as it is meant to be. It is true that poor learners do not read well as their scores are low, but had they been asked to read orally, we often find students read very slowly, at a word-for-word level, sometimes pronouncing or reading incorrectly, and largely without expression. Most importantly, students are not motivated to read beyond class time when they already find reading activity a struggle and utterly boring.

Today, reading instruction in the Thai EFL curriculum has been a struggle. The first reason is that many Thai EFL students lack reading practice, possibly due to cultural beliefs about reading. The reading deficiency of Thai students does not occur only in L2 reading materials, but also in L1. Poor reading ability, even in L1, is due to the fact that the country does not possess a strong reading ethic (Wisaijorn, 2008). Furthermore, the problems of reading in L2, such as English, largely reside in individual habits rather than their linguistic knowledge or the classroom instruction. Many students receive moderate support from their family in reading at home, and thus "their home environment was not really rich in literacy activities" (Yimwilai, 2008). The second reason is fluency instruction is not recognized as one of the reading components, and therefore is not implemented in the reading curriculum. Due to the traditional reading instruction in classrooms, students are not usually asked to read aloud. Even though they occasionally do so, teachers do not take their reading speed, accuracy, or prosodic features into account.

For over 5 years of being an English instructor, I have experienced learning behaviors of my students in reading class. Having been familiar with traditional reading instruction in Thailand, I often give time for students to read silently in class and eventually discuss comprehension with them. Very frequently, I notice that many students look up almost every word in the text in a dictionary. Some students look up the same word more than once. Certain words should already be familiar to them, but with inflections such as –ed, -es, -ing endings, this confuses them and requires extra time for students to look for the meanings.

This personal anecdote suggests that Thai students are indeed lacking automaticity in word recognition. Because technologies such as smart phone dictionaries, online dictionaries, and translation websites have become easily accessible, many Thai EFL students do not feel that they need to acquire word

recognition skills. With the absence of automaticity at word-level identification, other aspects of fluency are far from grasp for Thai students. As a result, it affects the text comprehension as a whole. Yimwilai (2008) found that the reading problems of English majors in both BA and B.Ed programs of Srinakharinwirot University ranged from word recognition, to finding references, to finding main ideas and details, and to finding topics of the text. She also pointed out that the causes of these problems were due to the fact that these students spent little time reading English.

These are the fundamental reasons why most of them become unsuccessful readers, and these reasons should trigger EFL reading instruction in Thailand to take the first step in implementing fluency. RT is suggested to be an instructional method with which to start. The next section will discuss how RT can be adjusted to fluency instruction in this context.

Application of RT to Thai EFL Context

Note that research on RT tends to focus on young learners (K-12) and very little on adult learners such as college students. This article suggests that RT implemented to Thailand's reading instruction at all levels of learners since adult learners are also in great need of fluency development. Adjustment to higher levels will be discussed. The guidelines are followed:

1) *Fluency lessons*: Explicit fluency instruction should be given by the instructor in order to illustrate an idea of what fluent reading is and why it is important.

2) *Modeling fluency*: The instructor should exhibit fluent reading to students. This is an important step of fluency development because having a good model provides a set goal for students to improve their reading. The instructor surely has to work on every aspect of fluency in her reading.

3) *Introduce an RT activity*: The instructor explains how RT is conducted. Keep in mind that RT does not need to take up the

entire class period. The instructor should spare 20-30 minutes for RT intervention.

4) *Script selections*: The instructor chooses scripts that are interesting and within students' reading level. If it is the first script, students need a good impression. Although most RT scripts are available on the internet, the instructor has a choice to create his/her own scripts by adapting from literature that the students are likely to be familiar with. Adjustment of script selections can be made for adult learners who tend to read more academic texts. Scripts of adult learners can be selected or adapted from the materials they are reading at the current level.

5) *Practice*: Apart from practicing reading aloud with their peers, individual students should take time to read silently. This process should facilitate his/her negotiation of comprehension and interpretation of the script. However, it should be conducted with the instructor's monitoring.

6) *Feedback*: The feedback should focus on students' development of reading rate, accuracy, phrasing, and prosody. Each criterion can be focused on individually or together with the others. For instance, the instructor should consider an appropriate reading speed and appropriate reading together. Keep in mind that some characters or some situations in a script do not always require fast reading. Therefore, word-per-minute (WPM) assessment may not be practical or relevant. Rather, feedback on phrasing is to ensure that students do not simply read word for word, but with meaningful units of sentences. If students are able to interpret the text, they should also know the appropriate reading speed and, eventually, the appropriate expressions.

Feedback on accuracy should be given separately and *after* the focus on the three criteria above because corrective feedback may discourage students as they are attempting to read. In fact, the instructor can provide a separate lesson on pronunciation as the way to raise phonemic awareness for students.

7) *Self-evaluation*: During the performance, the instructor may record an audio or a video of students. This will be useful for students to give a self-evaluation and make plans to improve their reading for the next scripts.

8) *Adaptation to other activities*: RT activities can lead to the enhancement of other skills such as writing and speaking skills. The instructor may also encourage students to come up with their own stories and create RT scripts for them. This may not only enhance their writing skills, but also confidence in oral communication skills as the learned vocabulary and phrases from RT scripts can be carried to every day conversation.

Nevertheless, challenges of RT application may be anticipated. This will be discussed along with possible solutions:

Challenge of word recognition instruction

Upon the process of word recognition skills, students and the instructor may encounter some difficulties. In order to raise students' phonemic/phonic awareness, pronunciation lessons should be provided along with fluency lessons. Since pronunciation has been neglected and has not been taught extensively in Thai EFL context, most Thai students (and teachers) usually pronounce English words inaccurately, or pronounce words according to the way words are written, etc. Inaccurate pronunciation can affect the correct interpretation of the text (e.g. when students have to deal with homographs or homophones, word inflections, or stress shift due to different parts of speech). For instance, the words 'minute' as a noun and 'minute' as an adjective have different pronunciation and meaning. The instructor may find it hard to assess words read correctly by students if the pronunciations of plural or past tense markers are dismissed or mispronounced. For example, the word 'walked' may be read differently by a student (either pronounce the final sound /t/, by adding a syllable /ɪd/, or read the same way as 'walk'). This results in several ways to

interpret the student's understanding of the word. It is possible that the student realizes that the verb "walked" indicates the past tense, or does not realize the tense concept of the verb, or thinks that "walked" is a different word with a different meaning from "walk".

To avoid confusion caused by word inaccuracy, lessons on pronunciation ought to be provided separately and extensively. Because the instructor's modeling is very important (Keehn, Harmon & Shoho, 2008), it is necessary that instructors master accurate word pronunciation beforehand. It is also important to point out to students that accurate word pronunciation has less to do with mastering a native-like accent than mastering word recognition skills.

Challenge of distributing reading parts

When it comes to assigning a role to each student, it may be difficult to find the scripts that allow equal distributions in terms of length or the amount of sentences. Main characters usually take up many sentences whereas minor characters do not. Those who take minor roles in the script may have less to practice reading with. For this matter, the instructor may take charge of allocating the role as suitable to students' level. Stronger students may take minor roles so that they can give way to weaker students for more practice with major roles. It is also recommended that the instructor ask the students to perform the script more than once, and each time have the students rotate their roles. Most importantly, however, the instructor should not force students to take the roles they are unwilling to perform.

Challenge of script selections

Since most RT scripts are produced in favor of L1 and L2 settings based on the literature that is likely to be familiar to students in such settings, they may not incentivize Thai students

to enjoy the story. Besides, some literature requires intercultural knowledge to interpret, particularly aspects such as humor and cultural references, and not to mention that cultural schema also play an important part in building comprehension. The instructor may have to provide background information of the scripts in order to enhance students' schematic knowledge. Otherwise, the scripts can be adjusted to make them suitable to the Thai EFL context. Furthermore, the instructor can extend the reading activities with RT to writing by having the students write their own scripts to perform. This can assure that the students will read the script based on the stories to which they can relate.

Conclusion

Fluency in reading is the key element to effective reading. Reading with appropriate rate, accuracy, phrasing and expressions can foster comprehension of the text. Fluency can be achieved through frequent reading practices like repeated reading. Reader's Theater is another form of repeated reading, and it is an interesting method that helps develop all areas of fluency as well as provide good reasons to re-read the same text. It is also a fun activity that all learners of L1, L2, and EFL can enjoy.

As for reading instructions in a Thai EFL setting, fluency has never been the focus of the curriculum in Thailand. With all of the benefits that RT could provide to disfluent readers, Thai EFL learners who are struggling with reading skills could become fluent readers if RT were to be invested in reading instruction. Upon conducting RT in Thai EFL classrooms, instructors need to be good models for fluent reading. Constructive feedback is crucial and has to be given carefully enough to not discourage students from reading.

RT may not be the sole effective instructional reading method, but it is a good start. Traditional methods are not to be abandoned entirely because some of them help learners cope with

word identification and foster comprehension. What the traditional methods are lacking is frequent oral practice, an emphasis on appropriate reading speed and expression that ensure comprehension without relying solely on the test scores of learners. RT can fulfill what is lacking. It could also work hand in hand with more traditional reading strategies. Most importantly, RT is an incentive method that can lead the Thai EFL learners to extensive reading. This would result in much more reading practice and a change of learners' attitudes toward reading that can be intimidating and laborious. Learning to read becomes reading to learn when learners discover that they no longer read English for the sake of learning English but they can read their way to learning anything.

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