

Improving Thai College Students' English /-s/ Pronunciation through Storytelling

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Abstract

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers and learners cope with many challenges with pronunciation because it is one of the most difficult areas in English skills. Since the phonological system in Thai and in English is different, Thai students frequently have difficulty and make errors when pronouncing English words. The objective of this quantitative study is to investigate the effects of storytelling on the improvement of Thai college students' English pronunciation. The target sound in this study is the final /-s/ because it plays an important role in English grammar, but /-s/ is omitted and mispronounced oftentimes by Thai students. This researcher employed the quasi-experimental design. Specifically, one-group pretest-posttest design was conducted with 25 participants, who are senior students enrolled in Practical English Phonetics course at the university in central Thailand. Participants were asked to practice reading a self-selected short folktale from Southeast Asia country and did a self-recording. The results indicated that following five weeks of intervention, there was a significant difference between pre and posttest from the storytelling; $t(24) = -5.53$ ($p < 0.05$). Moreover, the mean difference effect size was examined (Cohen's d). The magnitude of the effect was considered large ($d = 1.11$). Two non-standard variants of /-s/ that were found include [d] and [Ø]. For example, "Chinese" /ˌtʃaɪˈniːz/ pronounced as /ˌtʃaɪˈniːd/ and "once" /wɒns/ pronounced as /wɒn/ respectively. These results suggested that English pronunciation should be instructed by several kinds of activities in the class in order to encourage EFL students to learn and to foster their intelligible pronunciation.

Keywords: *Storytelling, Pronunciation; Phonetics; First Language Interference*

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English is a foreign language in Thailand, as a result the opportunity and frequency for Thai people to utilize English in daily life is diminished. English pronunciation is one of the most difficult areas for English as Foreign Language (EFL) students to acquire and improve (Hu, 2017; Khansir & Pakdel, 2016; Moedjito, 2016). Even though nowadays English is used as a lingua franca among people from around the world, speaking English close to a native speaker is not necessary. Fraser (2000) stated that “with good pronunciation, a speaker is intelligible despite other errors; with poor pronunciation, a speaker can be very difficult to understand, despite accuracy in other areas” (p.7). Therefore, intelligible pronunciation is important because it allows the listener to understand easily (Lucarevski, 2018).

Pronunciation should be taught in all second language classes through a variety of activities in order to motivate students to engage and develop oral communication skills. (Pardede, 2018). Although English teachers consistently attempt to find new activities to enhance students' English pronunciation, the results of some previous studies showed only small improvements after using intervention. For example, singing songs motivated learners to have correct pronunciation. However, when being evaluated in front of an instructor, students were shy and lacked confidence in the performance (Akkakoson, 2016).

The major problem of Thai EFL learners' English pronunciation is from the phonological system (Imamesup, 2011; Khamkien, 2010; Narksomepong, 2007; Yangklang, 2006). In other words, the sound structure in segmental level (e.g., consonants, vowels) and suprasegmental level (e.g., stress, intonation, rhythm) in Thai and English are different, which influence the speech production of the target language. This phenomenon can be called “first language interference,” which is commonly found in second language acquisition and it can affect any

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features of the target language including speaking, listening, reading, and writing (Gass & Selinker, 2008; Krasen, 1981). There are many common errors in English pronunciation that Thai students frequently make. For example, omitting /r/ as in “bread” /bread/ pronounced as /bed/, replacing /s/ with /d/ as in “class” /kla:s/ pronounced as /kla:d/. Consequently, mispronunciation can lead to misunderstanding, confusion, or communication breakdown (Fraser, 2000).

Although, in past decades there was a great deal of research conducted on improving Thai EFL learners’ speaking skills, the study focused on English pronunciation competence in the Thai EFL context seemed to be overlooked (Kitikanan, 2017; Sridhanyarat, 2017).

Literature Review

Phonological Features in Thai and English

Thai is in the Tai-Kadai language family and is considered as a tonal language that the pitch can differentiate the meaning of the words. There are 44 consonant letters, but only 21 consonant sounds, whereas the vowel system consists of 18 monophthongs and 6 diphthongs (Narksomepomg, 2007). In English, there are 21 consonant letters, but 24 consonant sounds can be produced. In terms of vowels production, 11 monophthongs and three diphthongs are produced in English (Narksomepomg, 2007).

Further, it is notably that all consonant sounds in English can occur in the final position of the words except glottal /h/, and two semivowels, namely /y/ and /w/ (Narksomepomg, 2007). However, in Thai words, there are only 8 consonant sounds that are allowed to occur in the final position: /n/, /m/, /ŋ/, /b/, /d/, /k/, /j/, /w/ (Narksomepomg, 2007). Therefore, Thai EFL learners have difficulties when pronouncing syllable-final sounds in English. For example, “ball” is

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pronounced as /bon/, /r/ in “car” is omitted, “bus” is pronounced as /bud/. These phenomena can be explained as “language interference”.

Thai EFL Learners' English Pronunciation Problems

A number of previous studies have been done on improving Thai EFL learners' English pronunciation (Khamkien, 2010; Nakin & Inpin, 2017; Sahatsathatsana, 2017; Yangklang, 2006). These researchers attempted to improve Thai EFL learners' pronunciation through various effective interventions.

Khamkhien (2010) addressed that Thai students' English pronunciation is unsatisfied. 90 college students were assessed their English pronunciation competence by identifying the stress syllable in 40 words excerpted from the textbooks. He found that the lowest test scores from the word assignment are five-syllable words. Interestingly, the results also revealed that gender is the main factor that causes scores. In other words, female participants could perform better than male students significantly.

The study of Sahatsathatsana (2017) reported that Thai college students in English Phonetics course faced with the problem with English pronunciation. Specifically, there are three sounds that they could not perform well include / θ /, / ð /, and / ʒ / in segmental level. Also, the participants found it difficult to link the sounds between words. It also found that language interference from L1 to the target language, individual's pronunciation ability, and prior experience of leaning English pronunciation can affect learners' English pronunciation competence.

In a quasi-experimental design research, Imamesup (2011) investigated the improvement of Thai students' pronunciation of fricative sounds through Audio Articulation Model (AAM). After 12 weeks of training toward the AAM, the pronunciation scores of students on English

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fricative sounds namely /v/, /t/, /ð/, /z/, /s/ significantly improved at the $p < 0.05$ level regardless students' proficiency level. Additionally, all participants had positive attitude toward the AAM model as it allows participants to practicing their English pronunciation from various kinds of activities for such as drill, minimal pair, and tongue twisters.

Yangklang (2006) examined Thai EFL students' English final /-l/ pronunciation through computer assisted instruction program (CAI). The findings indicated that CAI program yielded positive effect on improving Thai high school students' English final /-l/ both in the word level and in the sentence level. Moreover, more than 80% of students had positive attitude toward CAI program and felt more confident when pronouncing final /-l/ sound in English.

Regarding the vowel production, Thai EFL learners also have difficulties in pronunciation. Nusartleart and Pattanasorn (2015) explored the production and the perception of two English back vowels /u/ and /ʊ/ in Thai college students. The analysis from acoustic phonetics approach was employed and the results explicitly showed that most students mispronounced /u/ and /ʊ/ and could not differentiate these two sounds.

Storytelling and the Improvement of English Pronunciation

According to Dujmovic (2006), storytelling is a unique form of teaching. Dujmovic (2006) indicated that storytelling is “the art of narrating a tale from memory rather than reading it is one of the oldest of all art forms, reaching back to prehistoric times. Storytelling involves two elements – selection and delivery” (p. 75). Previous research showed that storytelling benefits EFL students in various ways, such as English-speaking skills and English pronunciation effectively (e.g., Ikramuddin, 2017; Lucarevschi, 2018; Mirza, 2020; Zare-Behatash, et al., 2016).

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Zare-Behatash et al. (2016) demonstrated that storytelling activities yielded positive effect on Iranian students' oral language skills. Students were engaged and motivated more to practice speaking English through storytelling techniques to improve pronunciation. Likewise, the findings from Ikramuddin (2017) and Erfiani (2017) suggested that storytelling activities helped improve Indonesian students' English vocabularies, creativity, grammar, as well as pronunciation.

In the Brazilian EFL context, Lucarevski (2018) indicated that storytelling plays a vital role on developing students' pronunciation. There was a significant difference between pre- and posttest scores on segmental sounds (i.e., /l/; /i/ and /ð/; /ə/) and suprasegmental (i.e., word stress) following the intervention. A recent study by Mirza (2020) reported that Digital Storytelling (DST) can be used as an alternative teaching and learning tool for EFL students. The major results of this research showed that having freedom of choice to choose and practice a selected story enabled preservice teachers to perform pronunciation (e.g., intonation) and deliver presentations more effectively. However, when compared to other teaching strategies, utilizing DST in the classroom can cause more time consumed and ethical issues of using copyrighted footages DST (Mirza, 2020). Together, these studies outline that storytelling can be used as an effective teaching and learning tool for developing EFL students' English pronunciation.

Purpose of the Study

This present study aims to investigate the effectiveness of storytelling in the development of Thai EFL students' English /-s/ pronunciation. Specifically, the variants of final /s/ (voiceless alveolar fricative stop) in English words will be explored and analyzed. This /-s/ is a consonant sound occurs only in the onset position in Thai words, but it can occur both in the initial and final

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position in English. Therefore, /s/ is one of the phonemes that Thai EFL learners frequently mispronounced (Narksompong, 2007; Sahatsathatsana, 2017). Moreover, /-s/ is the target sound in this research project because it also functions as a suffix in morphology, which indicates plural, possessive, and subject-verb agreement. As a result, mispronunciation or omitting /s/ at the end of the word can lead to writing errors as well. The results of this study may provide an alternative way of teaching English pronunciation in the classroom environment in Thailand.

Research question

What is the effect of storytelling on the improvement of pronunciation of /-s/ by Thai EFL students?

Methodology

School Context

This study was conducted in the university, which located in central Thailand. The university's primary mission is to produce preservice teachers. Currently, there are approximately 7,500 undergraduate students enrolled in six colleges, namely Education, Science and Technology, Management Science, Humanities and Social Sciences, Information Technology, Industrial Technology, and Management Science.

Participants

Participants were 25 fourth year students majoring in English of Arts program, College of Humanities and Social Sciences in the University in central Thailand. They enrolled in a course of Practical English Phonetics during January to June 2016 with mainstream 45 English of Arts major sophomores. The gender of participants includes 20% male and 80% female.

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Sample Selection

Participants were selected via homogenous sampling (Pajo, 2017). It is a subtype of purposive sampling that "...participants are chosen based on a trait or characteristic of interest to the researcher" (Pajo, 2017, p. 144). All participants were students who enrolled this course for the second times because they failed when they were sophomores.

Procedure

Practical English Phonetics is the core course that English major sophomores are required to enroll. It is a 16-week course that aims to provide fundamental concepts of Phonetics, speech organs, the production of human speech sounds, production mechanisms, and the International Phonetics Alphabet. Also, students will be able to understand the sound system of English, analyzing English phonological system including consonants, vowels, syllables, rhythm, and intonation.

The present study was conducted during the first until the fifth week of the course. At the first week, the students were informed the purpose of the present study and were assigned to select a short folktale from any country in Southeast Asia from the internet and submitted to the researcher to approve within a week. During the second week, the students were required to practice telling their selected story and record their voice via Line Application on their cellphone as a pretest and send their first recording to the researcher.

At the third and the fourth week, the lesson focused on consonant sounds in English. The content consists of place of articulation and manner of articulation. In other words, place of articulation includes labial, dental, alveolar, post-alveolar, palatal, velar, and glottal. Manner of articulation includes nasal, plosive, fricative, and approximant. At the end of two lessons of English consonants, students were provided drills, which are word lists and short sentences.

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Additionally, during week three and four, the students were required to practice their selected folktale in their free time and send their voice recordings to the researcher once a week.

At week five, the students were required to record their voice from telling their Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) folktale for the fourth times as a posttest and send it to the researcher (See Table 1).

Table 1. Timeline of the study

Week (s)	Activity
1	Recruitment meeting and student searched for a folktale
2	Introduction to Phonetics delivered Pretest data collection (Voice recording #1)
3	English consonants lesson delivered #1 (Voice recording #2)
4	English consonants lesson delivered #2 (Voice recording #3)
5	Posttest data collection (Voice recording #4)

Instrumentation

The researcher used storytelling for pre- and post-testing to test the students' /-s/ pronunciation in English words. The participants had a chance to freely choose a short ASEAN folktale from any 10 country in Southeast Asia. The folktales were selected from 4 countries

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namely, Thailand 44%, Myanmar 32%, Laos 20%, and Vietnam 4%. The length of each story is approximately one page long (See Appendix A).

As mentioned earlier in the procedure section, students submitted their voice recordings via Line Application to the researcher. Line is one of the most famous social media platforms using among Thais and it is also an effective mobile app for utilizing in English classroom (Shih et al., 2014). Line is originally developed by a Japanese company, which allows the users to chat by texting, calling, video calling or voice recording.

Data Analysis

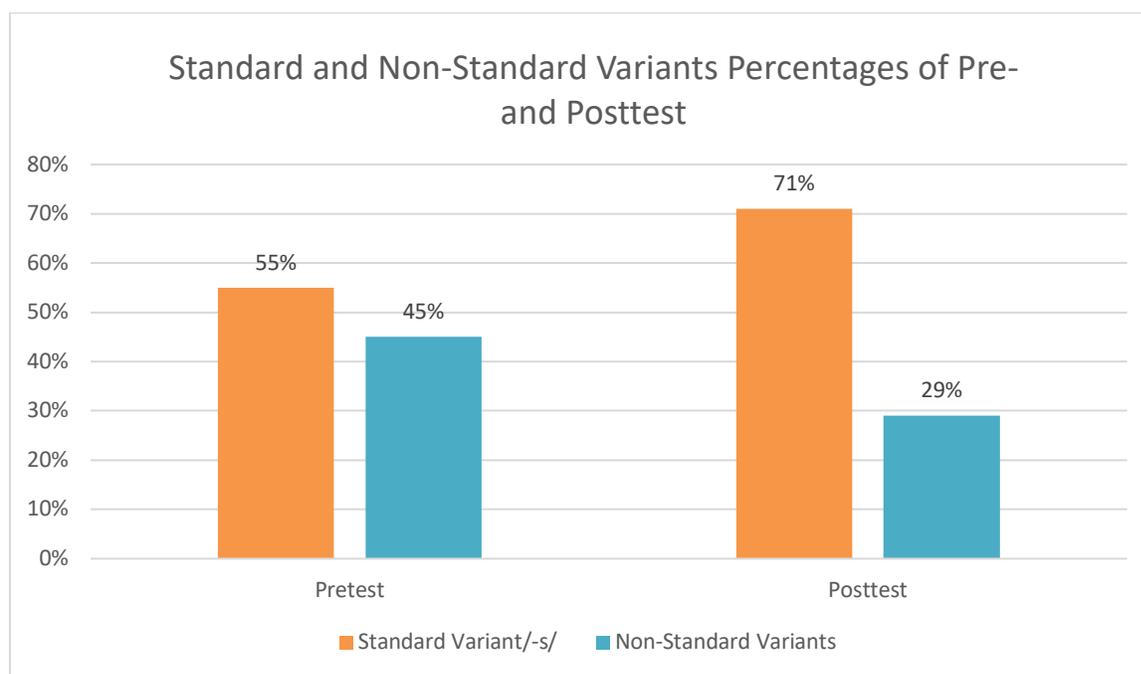
This quantitative research study was conducted based on quasi experimental design. Specifically, one group pre-posttest was utilized in this research (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). After the participants submitted their first voice recording as a pretest, the researcher listened carefully and recorded in the score sheet. (See Appendix B). The same process was done again for the posttest. After five weeks of data collection, the /-s/ and the variants scores of each participant were counted. The percentages of the frequency of standard variants /-s/ and non-standard variants from pre- and posttest of each participant were analyzed prior to conduct a paired samples *t*-test.

Results

The quasi-experimental design examined the effects of implementing storytelling during the course of Practical English Phonetics. The data from completed pretest and posttest were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 22. Specifically, a paired samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the frequency of /-s/ pronunciation scores of participants ($n = 25$). There was a significant difference from the pretest and the posttest; $t(24) =$

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-5.53, $p < 0.05$. For practical significance, mean difference effect sizes were compared (Cohen's d). The magnitude of the effect size was large ($d = 1.11$).



(Figure 1) Graph of standard variant /-s/ and non-standard variants' pre- and posttest score percentages

According to Figure 1, the percentage of posttest scores of standard variant /-s/ was slightly increased (16%) after the intervention. On the contrary, the percentage of posttest scores of non- standard variants include /-d/ and /Ø/ was slightly decreased (16%) after the intervention. For example, “Chinese” /,tʃaɪ'ni:z/ pronounced as /ʃaɪ'ni:d/, “once” /wəns/ pronounced as /wən/ respectively. Overall, the results indicated that the storytelling intervention yielded a positive effect on students' improvement on /-s/ pronunciation.

Discussion

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The main purpose of the present study was to examine the effectiveness of storytelling on fostering Thai college students' English /-s/ pronunciation. The results reported positive effect on using storytelling in developing Thai EFL students' English pronunciation proficiency in the course of Practical English Phonetics. The findings of the statistical analyses indicated that students made significant gains on the posttest after five weeks of intervention. The mean difference size was large ($d = -1.11$). The finding of this study is consistent with that of Lucarevschi (2018) who investigated that storytelling can be one of the effective strategies for enhancing EFL students' English pronunciation.

This study also implies that integrating technology in the English classroom, EFL students can gain benefits from self-practicing from their own voice recording outside the classroom context and online application can help reducing anxiety when speaking English (Ahmadi, 2018; Dong, 2013). The final insight from the unexpected outcome is that, some students mispronounced some English words when telling the story by adding /s/ after the nouns that not ending with "s". For example, there, king, survey, tree, and life. This phenomenon of hypercorrection in Sociolinguistic theory (Labov, 1972) can be investigated for the future research in the aspect of language variation or Psycholinguistics.

Limitations

It is necessary to mention that this study presented the primary results and have several limitations in terms of methodology and scope. Firstly, the findings of this research cannot be generalized due to the researcher being the one who taught and implemented the storytelling intervention in the Practical English Phonetics course. Secondly, it is unfortunate that participants' pronunciation was rated merely by the researcher. Consequently, I suggest that an instructor and an interventionist should not be the same one and there should be at least three

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native speakers of English who rate student's target sounds in order to increase reliability.

Thirdly, the numbers of participants were limited, as a result future researcher should recruit a great number of participants. Fourthly, future study should assess the intervention from the treatment and the control group in order to assess and compare the effects of intervention through rigorous experimentation.

Additionally, it would be interesting to have participants practice telling a same story multiple times and then be assessed pronunciation development on a different story to see if the skills had transferred or generalized. Furthermore, the longer period of time for implementation of storytelling could allow the students to practice English pronunciation more and might yield more effective results. Since the practice time for students was not long enough, the research was not able to see other perspectives of learning processes.

Moreover, the posttest should be administered to the students after the completion of the lessons of segmental including consonants and vowels, instead of having the posttest after the consonants lessons as the researcher did. Due to the influence of initial vowels, the posttest should be used after the vowels lessons because /s/ (voiceless alveolar fricative) will be changed to /z/ (voiced alveolar fricative), for instance "is" /iz/ and "always" /ɔlweiz/. Both theoretically and practically, /z/ is harder to acquire for Thai students. Therefore, it is important to be note that the word lists that elicited from the selected stories are ending with the letter "s" no matter if it is pronounced as /s/ or /z/. Also, the purpose of this study is merely focus on the phonological awareness of /-s/.

This study was conducted to investigate the English of Arts major students' improvement of English pronunciation. It would be interesting to explore English of Education major students'

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improvement of English pronunciation because they will be a role model for their students in the future.

Lastly, this study only focuses on implementing storytelling as an intervention. It would be interesting to follow up the results by interviewing the participants or asking them to complete a survey. The qualitative data will allow researchers to gain more understanding on students' attitudes toward using storytelling, an online device, an application to practice, and improve their phonological awareness.

Conclusion

English pronunciation is one of the most challenging areas in English that both EFL teachers and learners often have difficulties to teach and to learn (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; Hu, 2017). However, these preliminary results from a pre- and post- assessment indicated that storytelling can motivate students to learn and improve English pronunciation. The results of this study suggested that regardless of storytelling, using various kinds of activities could yield significant gains on EFL students' English pronunciation (Pardede, 2018).

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Appendix A

The Great Gourd of Heaven

(Lao folktale)

Long long ago the earth was covered with dense forest, and one enormous creeper grew out of the forest and stretched right up to the sky. It had only one gourd hanging from it, and this gourd was very, very big. The gods in heaven had a meeting, and decided that the earth should be inhabited, so one of the gods was sent down with his followers. His name was Khoun Bulom, and he had two wives, Yommala and Akkai.

There were no men or animals on earth at this time, just gods and some spirits. But the earth was very dark, because of the huge gourd that blocked out the light from the sun. Khoun Bulom sent a messenger to the Great God of heaven asking for help. The Great God, Pra In, ordered some other gods to come down to the earth to cut away the creeper and to make holes in the gourd too. As soon as they cut away the huge creeper, sunlight shone all over the earth, and it became a very bright, very pleasant place indeed.

But making holes in the gourd was very difficult task. At first the god used a pointed iron bar that they first heated in the fire. And once they made the hole many human beings started to crawl out from the centre of the gourd. But the hole was quite small and the human beings found it difficult to squeeze through. The gods saw this so they made another hole, this time with an axe. This axe made a big clean hole in the side of the gourd, and it was not difficult for them to get out. They were whiter than those who came out first, because the first human beings had to push their way out through the tiny, dark, sooty hole that the iron bar had burnt in the side of the gourd. But all of them came from the same place. Those who came first were the big brothers and sisters, and those who came next were the younger brothers and sisters; they were very closely related. The colour of their skin was not a problem for them at all.

These first human beings are the ancestors of all humanity. From that place they spread out all over the world. They adapted themselves to the various climates and natural environments in different places.

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But the important thing is that they came out from the same place and were the same human beings, and they truly loved one another as brothers and sisters.

When all human beings had come out, the gods pierced another hole in the gourd and many animals came out--elephants, horses, cows and so on, and after them many things came out for the human beings to use to make life beautiful. Jewels of all kinds, gold and silver.

Lao people have handed this story down from generation to generation, and it shows how every tribe is as worthy of honour and as significant as all the others, because we're all brothers and sisters and come from the same place.

Retrieved from http://www.seasite.niu.edu/lao/LaoFolkLiterature/Chapter2/New_Folder/great_gourd_of__heaven.htm

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Appendix B

Standard /-s/ and non-stand variants scores

Student name..... Student ID.....

Date of data collection..... pretest/ posttest

Name of folktale..... Country.....

According to the selected story, there are English words ending with /-s/ were found as shown in the table below.

	Words	/-s/	/-d/	/Ø/	Other	Notes
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						
7						
8						
9						
10						
Total						