

The Study of the Syntax-Prosody Mapping in the Reading Aloud of Taiwan EFL Learners

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Abstract

This research investigated the oral performances of 100 Taiwan EFL learners by examining their reading aloud recordings in the GEPT test. The research materials were from recordings of two short English passages, the first part of the three-part speaking test of the Intermediate Level General English Proficiency Test (GEPT). Of the 100 EFL test-takers, 50 passed the speaking test; 50 failed. The Praat software and ToBI (Tones and Break Indices) system¹ were used to observe and analyze their prosodic representations such as pause length and positions, pitch variations, prosodic phrasing, boundary low tone, boundary lengthening, continuation rise, and syntax-prosody mapping etc.

Based on the observation and analyses, it is found that for the failing group, the low comprehensibility of their reading came from lack of prosodic phrases and therefore no syntax-prosody mapping as well as frequent incorrect lexicon pronunciations such as segment deletion or substitution, wrong stress position, consonant cluster simplification, and dropping of inflectional morphemes. Pedagogical suggestions for vocabulary teachings are: first, increase the sound input in class to let learners feel the strong vs. weak syllables/words and the rhythm of English; second, emphasize the speaking part in teaching words, especially the stress position, vowel alternation, and the attached inflectional morpheme; third, arouse learners' phonological awareness of the association between letters and their pronunciations, so they won't drop any segment and when they see a new word, they have sense and can try to utter it; fourth, adopt the semantic approach to link the functional inflection such as the past tense with the prosody (sound) using body language or gestures, so learners can acquire the relations naturally. For the passing group, although the comprehensibility of their reading was better from the accurate word pronunciation, the prosodic phrasing was not constant and stable and the prosodic structure of intermediate phrase (ip) was just emerging. Intonational Phrase (IPs) were rarely seen because there were little boundary low tone of L-L% or boundary lengthening to support the existence of IPs. There was no clear prosodic distinction between ips and IPs. In addition, no clear and stable syntax-prosody mappings were observed in prosodic structures such as list tones and continuation rises. Some prosodic pedagogy could be: first, demonstrate longer prosodic units in class such as

¹ ToBI system is a common software for contemporary prosody research. It has only two tones (H and L), but with some modifications, the tones can describe the tonal contours, such as H⁻ and L⁻ to signal the pitch at the end of an intermediate phrase (ip) or H% and L% to indicate the boundary tones at Intonational Phrase (IPs) boundaries or H* and L* to indicate the linking to stressed syllables. English has prosodic hierarchy of IP > ip > P-word > feet and the syntax-prosody mapping at the right end at various layers is required so the prosody can reveal proper internal structures of an utterance.

sentences or paragraphs so that learners can observe how small phrases (ips), and full phrases (IPs) are presented and learn their differences; second, adopt the sound interpretation approach to link the prosody (sound) with the structure (i.e. a list of things) by repeating the tonal structures (i.e. continuous rise), so learners can associate their relations naturally; third, lead learners to learn the marking of a full phrase (IP); i.e. lengthening of the final tone, larger pauses, and downdrifting the small phrases (ips) inside towards the end of a full phrase; fourth, make learners aware of the syntactic structures of an utterance so they can do correct prosody-syntax mapping. In conclusion, the phonological performance of the passing group in Taiwan EFL learners was better than that of the failing group; yet, both groups generally did not know how to do prosodic phrasing well and syntax-prosody mapping needed to be improved greatly. Prosody is easily noticed if teachers can demonstrate more in class. However, for students to acquire correct and fluent prosody of English, teachers should encourage them to speak up more and use English as a means of communication.