

“Reading this way was Lively and Fun”: Improving Thai EFL Students’ English Reading Fluency Through Readers Theater

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Article information	Abstract
Article history: Received: 4 Oct 2025 Last revised: 20 Aug 2026 Accepted: 20 Aug 2026 Available online: 24 Aug 2026 Keywords: English as a foreign language Reading fluency Readers theater	Despite the critical role of reading fluency in academic achievement, limited reading automaticity remains a significant challenge for many Thai university students. This quasi-experimental study attempts to examine the impact of Readers Theater (RT), a drama-based reading activity, implemented as an instructional treatment to improve the English reading fluency and motivation of Thai EFL students. Accordingly, a mixed-methods approach was employed. Two classes of first-year undergraduates were assigned to an experimental group ($n = 25$) and a control group ($n = 20$). The experimental group received RT-based instruction for 12 weeks, while the control group was taught using conventional reading instruction. Quantitative data were obtained from oral reading fluency pretest and posttest administered before and after the intervention. The results indicated that the experimental group showed a high increase in their overall reading fluency scores from the pretest ($M = 1.61$, $SD = 0.70$) to the posttest ($M = 2.39$, $SD = 0.65$), while the control group improved more modestly from the pretest ($M = 1.33$, $SD = 0.40$) to the posttest ($M = 1.57$, $SD = 0.45$). The improvement was statistically significant in both groups; however, the experimental group demonstrated a larger effect ($t = 5.27$, $p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = 1.05$) than the control group ($t = 3.51$, $p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = 0.78$). Qualitative data from open-ended questions also revealed that students who engaged in RT felt more enjoyment, confidence, and motivation. These findings suggest that RT is an effective approach for enhancing oral reading fluency among Thai EFL learners.

INTRODUCTION

Reading fluency is widely recognized as a key component of literacy and reading development. National Reading Panel (2000) recognizes that fluency is among the essential skills necessary for achieving comprehension and academic success. Fluent readers have the ability to read words accurately at an appropriate speed, and with proper expression, all contribute to further understanding and engagement with texts (Kuhn & Schwanenflugel, 2019). Studies are

continually pointing towards a clear connection between reading fluency and comprehension outcomes, highlighting fluency as a central gateway to reading proficiency and academic growth (Rasinski et al., 2016; Rasinski et al., 2020; Wilang et al., 2025; Young et al., 2019).

Despite its importance, fluency often receives limited attention during English class instruction, particularly in the Thai EFL contexts. Instruction is primarily on grammar, or rote memorization of vocabulary, and silent reading for comprehension, while oral and prosodic reading are frequently overlooked (Oeamoum & Sriwichai, 2020; Wilang et al., 2025). Moreover, English teaching is still deeply test-oriented and reading is usually assessed by comprehension questions and grammar-based exercises. As a result, Thai students rarely try repeated oral performance and reading activities to develop fluency (Chawwang, 2008; Thongtai, 2023).

Studies in Thailand provide empirical support for these concerns. Research has shown that Thai EFL learners tend to demonstrate low levels of automaticity, limited efficiency in word recognition, and weak oral reading performance when reading aloud in English (Sukying, 2025; Thongwichit & Buripakdi, 2021). These difficulties are particularly evident among non-English major university students, for whom reading English remains one of the most; persistent challenges (Thongwichit & Buripakdi, 2021). Moreover, classroom-based investigations have also reported that most Thai EFL learners read aloud slowly and cautiously, with limited prosodic variation, and have tendency to rely on word-by-word decoding rather than fluent, connected-text reading (Lekwilai, 2016; Thongwichit & Buripakdi, 2021). This type of reading patterns has been associated with reduced confidence and lower motivation to engage oneself in oral reading tasks (Thongtai, 2023).

Further, Thai students' reading behaviors had been identified to focus more on the decoding and translating purposes of reading, rather than communicational aspects including expression and interaction (Sha'ar & Boonsuk, 2021). This tendency is further supported by other studies on language learning, which confirm that language learning fluency tends to affect language learning performance, including comprehension, motivation, engagement, and even overall learning outcomes for Thai language students (Balnig et al., 2024; Ma & Zhao, 2025; Park, 2022). To bridge this fluency gap, instructional approaches are therefore needed that can simultaneously support the development of oral reading fluency and enhance learners' motivation and engagement.

One promising approach is RT, a drama-based reading activity using repeated reading (RR) approach, script rehearsal, and expressive read-aloud delivery. The method allows students to rehearse and perform scripts without memorizing them, as they are permitted to hold and read directly from the script during performance. This reduces performance pressure and creates a low-anxiety, engaging learning environment. By having students read the same text multiple times, RT supports improvements in accuracy, rate, and prosody development. Studies in both L1 and L2 contexts have shown it to be effective in improving fluency as well as creating a positive reading attitude (Kaewsrinuam & Weawchimplee, 2025; Lowers et al., 2021; Thienkalaya & Chusanachoti, 2020; Young et al., 2019; Young et al., 2020).

However, despite growing research on reading fluency and the reported effectiveness of RT in various L1 and L2 contexts (Thienkalaya & Chusanachoti, 2020; Thongtai, 2023; Young et al., 2020), empirical studies examining its impact within Thai EFL higher education remain limited. In particular, little research has systematically investigated how RT may simultaneously improve multiple dimensions of oral reading fluency (e.g., accuracy, rate, expression, and pronunciation) and enhance reading motivation among Thai university students, especially non-English majors. This lack of context-specific and multidimensional investigation represents a significant gap in the current literature.

With the ongoing fluency challenges faced among Thai EFL learners and the positive outcomes associated with RT, this study examines its effect on improving the reading fluency of Thai university students. Specifically, it investigates the impact of RT on oral reading accuracy, rate, expression, and pronunciation as well as on students' reading motivation. Accordingly, this study contributes to the scarcity but growing bodies of the study on drama-based reading instruction in the Thai EFL contexts and offers practical insights for teachers and curriculum designers seeking innovative, student-centered approaches to enhance reading fluency and engagement in Thai classrooms.

Research questions

- 1) To what extent does participation in RT improve Thai EFL students' reading fluency in English?
- 2) How does RT influence Thai EFL reading fluency?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading fluency

Reading fluency is generally known to be a basic of the acquisition of literacy and a crucial requirement for successful reading comprehension. It is most generally described as the ability to read a piece of text accurately, automatically, and with appropriate expression (National Reading Panel, 2000). Rasinski (2004) emphasizes that fluency acts as a bridge between word recognition and comprehension, allowing readers to gaze beyond decoding mechanics to the more important work of constructing meaning. Words are read at an appropriate rate and accurately by fluent readers, as well as exhibit rhythm, phrasing, and prosody that mirror speech patterns, which facilitates easier understanding.

More specifically, the three interrelated aspects of fluency are: accuracy (the precise recognition and decoding of words), automaticity (a part of reading rate that refers to reading words automatically and smoothly in connected text), and prosody (the judicious application of phrasing, stress, and intonation to express understanding) (Hudson et al., 2005). Collectively, these provide the confidence that reading is not merely a mechanical process but one that enables meaning-making. It has been thoroughly documented through that fluency is never an end in itself but always an entry point towards comprehension

(Kuhn & Schwanenflugel, 2019). In case of the readers are merely engaged in decoding, little room is left for more advanced processes such as inference, interpretation, and critical thinking (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974).

Recent studies in EFL and ESL contexts have highlighted the importance of RR and performance-based approaches, such as RT, in enhancing the components of fluency. Park (2022) found that timed repeated reading drills improved the reading fluency of Korean EFL university students. Similarly, Balnig et al. (2024) revealed that among the three dimensions of fluency, the strongest impact on comprehension was associated with automaticity, reflecting the efficiency of word recognition and reading connected text with appropriate speed and smoothness. Evidence from Taiwanese students further demonstrated that improvements in prosody, such as fewer pause intrusions and greater natural pitch variation, significantly supported fluent and expressive reading (Chung & Bidelman, 2022). Furthermore, technology-assisted reading tools have also confirmed the close relationship between fluency and overall reading performance, with AI-based assessment showing high correlations between fluency, accuracy, and comprehension ($r = 0.984, p < 0.01$) (Wilang et al., 2025).

Overall, the literature indicates that reading fluency is a multidimensional construct involving accuracy, automaticity, and prosody, all of which play a vital role in supporting reading comprehension. Despite growing evidence of effective fluency instruction in EFL and ESL settings, learners in different educational contexts continue to face distinct challenges in developing these skills.

Reading fluency in the Thai EFL contexts

While reading fluency has been extensively examined in first language (L1) contexts, it seems to have received comparatively less attention in EFL instruction, particularly in Thailand (Lekwilai, 2016; Oeamoum & Sriwichai, 2020; Wilang et al., 2025). In English classroom, traditional reading instruction often emphasizes grammar translation, vocabulary memorization, and comprehension-focused exercises, frequently overlooking the development of fluency (Chawwang, 2008; Lekwilai, 2016; Thongtai, 2023). Consequently, many Thai EFL learners read English texts slowly and in a fragmented manner, which can undermine both their confidence and willingness to engage with written materials, ultimately affecting their academic performance and motivation to read (Thongwichit & Buripakdi, 2021). In addition, Thai EFL learners typically have limited exposure to spoken English outside the classroom, restricting opportunities to develop prosody and expressive reading skills. This need has driven increasing interest in fluency-focused instructional strategies within EFL contexts, including RR, paired reading, and performance-based approaches, which aim to enhance both reading proficiency and learner engagement.

Research on readers theater

RR approach was initially designed by Samuels (1979) as a fluency exercise in which students read the same passage over and over again until some level of desired accuracy and automaticity is achieved. The reason is that frequent exposure to familiar text unloads

cognitive load, and readers can decode words more efficiently and concentrate on meaning (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; Rasinski, 2012; Rasinski et al., 2016). Research in both L1 and L2 settings consistently illustrates that RR strengthens word identification, oral reading fluency, prosody, and comprehension (Li et al., 2025; Nichols et al., 2008; Thongthai, 2023; Young & Rasinski, 2018).

Based on RR's principles, RT is a performance-based reading instructional strategy meant to enhance students' reading proficiency and provides learners an opportunity to practice reading scripts aloud multiple times and perform their roles in an informal setting. Young et al. (2019) describe RT as "a minimalist type of performance" (p. 1), or without props, costumes, and memorization, which gives students minimal pressure while engaging with reading text in their hands.

Studies have repeatedly indicated that RT has the potential to improve reading fluency at different ages, levels of education, and environments. Young and Rasinski (2018) noted that elementary children who were assigned to 35-week RT groups made significant gains in oral reading fluency, particularly word recognition, and prosody. Similarly, Young et al. (2021) reported an improvement in reading accuracy in elementary school children after an eight-week RT intervention. Besides enhancing fluency, RT has also been observed to increase students' motivation and interest. Because of the stimulating character of scripts and absence of memorization required, students find the exercise as fun and less stressful (Marshall, 2017; Walker, 2023). Creating fun scripts allows students to enjoy reading individually as well as collaboratively a lot with other students (Hautala et al., 2023; Ruengwatthakee, 2021).

While RT has been explored in a limited number of studies in Thai EFL contexts, current research suggests that it can be an effective tool for promoting the oral reading skills of Thai learners. Lekwilai (2016) found that university students improved their fluency in reading and gained confidence after participating in RT. Additional research by Thienkalaya and Chusanachoti (2020) identified that Thai university students showed great prosody gains following six weeks of RT practice. The same studies indicated that cooperative practice motivated the students to rehearse and read scripts carefully, developing positive reading attitudes. With limited empirical studies on RT conducted in Thai university students' contexts, the current research hopes to make a contribution to the existing literature by investigating its impact on reading fluency among undergraduates.

METHOD

This study employed a mixed methods design to address the research questions, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data for triangulation in order to enhance the credibility of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A quasi-experimental research design with a two-group pretest-posttest approach was used to measure the participants' reading performance before and after the intervention.

Participants and context

The participants were selected through convenience sampling. Two intact classes of first-year Thai university students enrolled in English for Communication courses at a university in central Thailand were randomly assigned as control ($n = 20$) and experimental ($n = 25$) groups, respectively. The experimental group participated in a 14-week RT intervention that involved repeated, collaborative reading and performing scripts, whereas the control group received traditional reading instruction without any performance component.

Research instruments

1. **Pretest and Posttest:** The pretest and posttest were developed. One passage from *Little red riding hood* (approximately 150 words, CEFR A2 level) was used to assess the participants' reading fluency. Each participant read the passage aloud individually while being recorded by the researchers.
2. **Reading Fluency Rubric:** The adapted Multidimensional Fluency Scale developed by Zutell and Rasinski (1991) was used to assess the participants' oral reading fluency, focusing on expression, phrasing, smoothness, and pace (National Reading Panel, 2000; Rasinski, 2004). In the present study, the rubric was contextually adapted for an EFL setting by including an additional category: pronunciation. Although pronunciation is not typically treated as a standalone component of fluency in L1 frameworks, its inclusion in this study was theoretically and pedagogically justified within an EFL context. In foreign language settings, inaccurate pronunciation may affect intelligibility, disrupt prosodic flow, and interfere with listeners' perception of fluency. Previous research in EFL contexts has indicated that pronunciation accuracy can influence oral fluency performance and expressive reading (Ruengwatthakee, 2021; Tantiwich & Sinwongsuwat, 2021; Wilang et al., 2025). The adapted rubric consisted of five dimensions: (1) accuracy, (2) automaticity (reflected in appropriate rate and smooth word recognition in connected text), (3) expression and prosody, (4) phrasing and smoothness, and (5) pronunciation. Each dimension was rated on a four-point scale (1 = beginning, 4 = advanced), resulting in a maximum possible total score of 20 points. A detailed description of the rubric criteria is presented in Appendix A to enhance transparency and clarity in score interpretation. Importantly, this rubric was used to evaluate the pre-test and post-test oral reading assessments. The RT classroom performances were conducted for instructional and rehearsal purposes only and were not included in the quantitative scoring. This distinction ensures clarity regarding the source of the reported results.
3. **RT Scripts:** Three CEFR A2-level scripts were adapted from classic and popular tales and written in English by one of the researchers: *The hen* (Aesop's fable), *Sangthong* (Thai folktale), and *Doraemon* (a Japanese cartoon). All scripts were proofread by two native English speakers to ensure linguistic accuracy. These scripts were implemented exclusively with the experimental group as part of the RT intervention, with each script being used for four weeks.
4. **Open-ended Questions:** After the intervention each participant in the experimental group was asked to reflect on their experiences with RT. The questions were reviewed and validated by three experts in the field to ensure content validity and appropriateness for the research context.

Data collection

1. Quantitative Data: Reading pretest and posttest scores of the participants from both groups were collected in the first and the fourteenth weeks, respectively. The pre- and posttests were administered by one of the researchers.
2. 14-Week Teaching Plan Outline for Control and Experimental Groups: The study lasted 14 weeks in total, including Week 1 pretest, Weeks 2–13 intervention, and Week 14 posttest. RT was implemented with the experimental group for 12 weeks (Weeks 2–13), while the control group received traditional reading instruction during the same period. Each weekly session lasted 60 minutes. The detailed teaching plan for both groups is presented in Appendix B.

Week 1: Both groups completed a pretest to assess baseline reading performance.

Weeks 2–13: Each session followed a structured format:

1. **15-minute mini-lesson (Both groups):** Introduced the target reading fluency skill for the session.

2. **30-minute practice:**

- Experimental group: During this phase, approximately the first 15 minutes were devoted to modeling and comprehension support at the beginning of each new script cycle. The researchers introduced the script by explaining the storyline, characters, and context to ensure basic comprehension. Key vocabulary and expressions were clarified. One of the lecturers then modeled fluent oral reading, demonstrating pronunciation, stress, intonation, phrasing, and expressive delivery.

The remaining 15 minutes were used for and rehearsal of the RT scripts. Comprehension discussions about character roles, emotions, and intended meanings were integrated to support meaningful and expressive reading.

When the session did not involve a new script cycle, the full 30 minutes were allocated to rehearsal of the previously introduced script.

- Control group: Students spent the full 30 minutes practicing CEFR A2-level short passages, focusing on accuracy, rate, word stress, and intonation. The researchers provided immediate feedback throughout the practice.

3. **15-minute performance:**

- Experimental group: Students performed the scripts in front of peers, applying fluency and expressive reading skills.

- Control group: Students read their short passages aloud for peer and instructor feedback.

Week 14: Both groups completed the posttest to evaluate improvements in reading fluency and allow comparison between traditional instruction and the performance-based RT intervention.

3. Qualitative Data: After the intervention, the participants in the experimental group were invited to reflect on their experiences with RT through written open-ended questions. Participation in the qualitative data collection was voluntary, and a total of 25 participants chose to provide written responses. The open-ended questions were administered in written form and completed individually. The participants responded in Thai to allow

them to express their thoughts clearly and reflectively without linguistic constraints. This approach was intended to encourage more honest, detailed, and nuanced responses (Li & Miao, 2025). All quoted excerpts presented in this section were translated into English by the researchers for reporting purposes, and the English versions were reviewed by a native English speaker to enhance the accuracy and clarity of the translations. To ensure the participants' anonymity, all qualitative excerpts are identified using participant codes (P1–P25).

Data analysis

Quantitative data

Quantitative data from the pretest and posttest were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, and Cohen's *d*. These analyses were conducted to examine the participants' reading fluency scores and to determine the extent of improvement in accuracy, rate, and prosody after the RT intervention. Additionally, Cohen's *d* was employed because it is a widely recognized and straightforward measure of effect size in educational research, providing a clear indication of the magnitude of observed improvements in reading fluency (Gignac & Szodorai, 2016). The obtained value of Cohen's *d* was interpreted according to conventional benchmarks: 0.20 indicates a small effect, 0.50 a medium effect, and 0.80 or higher a large effect. This approach provided an estimate of the practical significance of the RT intervention on the participants' reading fluency (Cohen, 1988).

To ensure reliability of the quantitative data, the students' classroom lecturers were not involved in the scoring process. Instead, three inter-raters scored all pretest and posttest recordings using the Multidimensional Fluency Scale. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa, which yielded a value of 0.92, indicating high agreement. Any discrepancies between raters were discussed and resolved to maintain scoring consistency.

Qualitative data

Qualitative data collected from open-ended questions were analyzed using content analysis. This method involved systematically coding the participants' responses, identifying recurring themes, and categorizing the data to capture insights into students' perceptions, experiences, and motivation during the RT activities (Krippendorff, 2018). To reinforce credibility, two researchers independently coded the qualitative data and then discussed discrepancies until consensus was reached, ensuring reliability of the thematic analysis. Triangulation of data sources was employed to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, ensuring that the results reflected both quantitative improvements and the participants' subjective experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

RESULTS

To address the first research question, the study compared the pretest and posttest reading fluency scores of Thai EFL students in the control and experimental groups. While both groups demonstrated significant improvements in overall reading fluency, the experimental group showed substantially greater gains following the RT intervention. As presented in Table 1, the experimental group's mean score increased from 1.61 ($SD = 0.70$) to 2.39 ($SD = 0.65$), representing a gain of 0.78 points with a large effect size ($d = 1.05$). By comparison, the control group improved from 1.33 ($SD = 0.40$) to 1.57 ($SD = 0.45$), with a smaller gain of 0.24 points and a medium effect size ($d = 0.78$).

A closer examination of the five fluency subcomponents revealed a consistent pattern favoring the RT intervention. The largest improvement was observed in phrasing (gain = 0.90, $d = 3.01$), followed by pronunciation (gain = 0.82, $d = 2.05$), smoothness (gain = 0.79, $d = 2.23$), and expression (gain = 0.71, $d = 2.10$), all of which showed very large effect sizes in the experimental group. These findings indicate that RT supported broad improvements across multiple dimensions of oral reading fluency rather than enhancing only a single aspect.

In contrast, the control group showed relatively modest gains across most subcomponents. The smallest improvement occurred in smoothness, which showed virtually no change from pretest to posttest (gain = 0.04, $d = 0.04$) and was the only subcomponent that did not reach statistical significance. Although statistically significant improvements were observed in expression, phrasing, and pace, their gains were consistently smaller than those of the experimental group.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the experimental group outperformed the control group across all five fluency subcomponents. Notably, the greatest differences between the two groups were found in phrasing and smoothness, suggesting that RT particularly facilitated students' ability to read connected text with appropriate phrasing and greater continuity. Overall, these findings demonstrate that students who participated in RT achieved stronger improvements in reading fluency than those receiving traditional reading instruction.

Table 1
Pretest and posttest reading fluency scores

Reading Fluency	Group	<i>n</i>	Pretest		Posttest		Gains	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Effect Size
			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				
Expression	Control	20	1.22	0.42	1.60	0.49	0.38	3.88	0.00	0.87
	Experimental	25	1.65	0.70	2.36	0.65	0.71	0.71	0.00	2.10
Phrasing	Control	20	1.08	0.22	1.52	0.49	0.44	4.96	0.00	1.11
	Experimental	25	1.51	0.60	2.41	0.72	0.90	15.05	0.00	3.01
Smoothness	Control	20	1.48	0.36	1.52	0.39	0.04	0.20	0.42	0.04
	Experimental	25	1.61	0.72	2.40	0.68	0.79	11.14	0.00	2.23
Pace/Rate	Control	20	1.42	0.52	1.67	0.49	0.25	2.80	0.01	0.63
	Experimental	25	1.75	0.78	2.43	0.63	0.68	7.78	0.00	1.56
Pronunciation	Control	20	1.43	0.46	1.52	0.40	0.09	1.68	0.06	0.38
	Experimental	25	1.51	0.69	2.33	0.58	0.82	10.25	0.00	2.05
Total Scores	Control	20	1.33	0.40	1.57	0.45	0.24	3.51	0.00	0.78
	Experimental	25	1.61	0.70	2.39	0.65	0.78	5.27	0.00	1.05

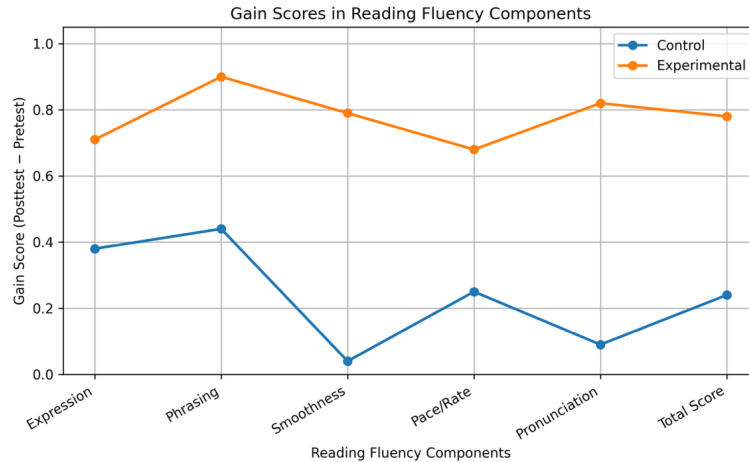


Figure 1 Gain scores in reading fluency components

Comparison of gain scores in reading fluency components between control and experimental groups

In response to research question 2, the qualitative data from the open-ended questions were coded and grouped into four themes based on their conceptual similarities. These themes reflect students' perceptions of how RT influenced their reading fluency, as well as related affective and learning processes.

Theme 1: Development of reading fluency components

Students' reflections indicated that RT enhanced several components of reading fluency, particularly word accuracy, prosody, and vocabulary knowledge. The participants also reported greater reading confidence and a reduced tendency to read word by word.

Several participants described increased automaticity and continuity in reading. For example, P1 stated, *"I think I read more smoothly and fluently,"* while P3 explained, *"Now I can read and spell better—even read continuously, not word by word."* Similarly, P4 reflected, *"I corrected mispronunciations and could now read longer passages—not word by word like before."* These comments suggest that repeated rehearsal and performance inherent in RT enabled students to shift cognitive resources away from decoding to meaning-making. This interpretation aligns with theoretical models of fluency emphasizing automatic word recognition (Rasinski et al., 2022).

In addition, prosodic development emerged as a particularly salient outcome. Students frequently referred to improvements in emotional expression and intonation. P2 noted, *"I became more expressive and fluent,"* while P5 stated, *"I improved in emotional expression and pronunciation."* These reflections indicate that the performative nature of RT encouraged attention to rhythm, stress, and emotional nuance. This finding aligns with recent research demonstrating that drama-based and performance-oriented reading activities promote prosodic sensitivity and expressive oral reading (Lekwilai, 2021; Young et al., 2020).

Moreover, vocabulary development was also perceived as contributing to improved fluency. P1 mentioned, *"I learned some new words and improved my reading,"* while P17 stated, *"I learned many new words and did group work."* P11 added, *"It really helped me talk better because I used to have difficulty with some words."* These responses suggest that repeated exposure to lexical items within meaningful scripts enhanced word familiarity, which in turn supported reading accuracy and smoothness. This interaction between vocabulary knowledge and fluency development is consistent with recent EFL research highlighting lexical familiarity as a key predictor of oral reading fluency (Soleimani et al., 2022).

Theme 2: Increased motivation, enjoyment, and speaking confidence

Students' responses strongly indicate that RT fostered positive affective conditions for reading development, particularly increased enjoyment, motivation, and confidence in reading aloud. Rather than viewing reading as a mechanical task, students described the activity as engaging and emotionally rewarding.

Several participants emphasized enjoyment as a defining feature of the experience. P6 stated, *"It was fun. I got to do activities with my friends,"* while P9 remarked, *"Reading this way was lively and fun."* P5 explained, *"This activity made English reading feel less boring and more fun,"* and P16 reflected, *"I realized reading English isn't always boring."* These comments suggest that RT reshaped students' affective orientation toward reading, which is particularly important in EFL contexts where low motivation often constrains reading practice. Recent studies similarly report that enjoyment and engagement play a mediating role in sustained reading involvement and fluency development (Thongtai, 2023).

Increased enjoyment was closely linked to gains in speaking confidence. P12 stated, *"I showed good intonation and I felt more confident reading English,"* while P3 described the activity as *"really fun, like performing in a play and taking turns with friends, showing the feelings of the character."* These reflections indicate that RT provided a low-anxiety environment that encouraged oral risk-taking. This finding supports recent evidence that structured group performance reduces speaking anxiety and enhances oral confidence among EFL learners (Aktas, 2023).

At the same time, some students acknowledged limitations in their expressive abilities. For instance, P13 stated, *"I need to get better on expression,"* and P14 commented, *"I still need to get better on emotional expression and reading."* Rather than indicating failure, these reflections suggest a growing awareness of the complexity of fluent, expressive reading and reinforce the view that confidence and fluency develop progressively through continued practice.

Theme 3: Supportive peer work

Peer collaboration emerged as a crucial supportive element of RT. Students' reflections suggest that working with peers reduced anxiety, facilitated problem-solving, and sustained engagement during reading activities.

P2 described, *“I liked it and talked more to friends. I asked them if I could not read a word,”* highlighting how peer interaction enabled immediate assistance during reading difficulties. P3 similarly noted, *“It was really fun, like acting out a play and exchanging lines with friends,”* while P4 stated, *“This exercise was fun because I could work with friends and read different scripts.”* These comments indicate that collaborative rehearsal transformed reading into a socially mediated activity, allowing learners to scaffold each other’s performance.

Such peer-supported learning aligns with sociocultural perspectives that emphasize interaction and shared meaning-making as drivers of language development. Recent studies have shown that collaborative reading tasks promote oral fluency by lowering affective barriers and increasing opportunities for meaningful repetition (Ruengwathakee, 2021; Thienkalaya & Chusanachoti, 2020). In this study, peer work appeared to function not only as emotional support but also as a mechanism for sustained practice and engagement.

Theme 4: Awareness of ongoing learning needs

In addition to reporting improvements, students demonstrated heightened metacognitive awareness of their reading abilities. Many participants were able to articulate specific aspects of fluency that required further development, particularly pronunciation, intonation, and emotional expression.

Within the conceptual framework of this study, pronunciation is understood as an integral dimension of oral reading fluency, particularly in EFL contexts where intelligibility directly influences prosodic flow and overall fluency performance (Derwing & Munro, 2015). Accordingly, students’ comments on pronunciation are interpreted as reflecting ongoing refinement within the broader construct of fluency rather than as evidence of a separate linguistic skill.

For example, P2 admitted, *“I think I didn’t do very well. It made me see that I’m still not very fluent,”* while P6 stated, *“I still need to work on expression and fluency.”* P7 reflected, *“I still need to work on intonation and pronunciation,”* and P8 noted, *“I still need to pronounce ‘s’ and ‘r’ sounds more clearly.”*

These reflections suggest that RT promoted reflective thinking by making qualitative dimensions of fluent reading more salient to learners. As students engaged in repeated performance and peer feedback, they became more aware of both their progress and limitations. This outcome aligns with recent research indicating that performance-based reading activities enhance learners’ metacognitive monitoring and self-regulated learning in EFL contexts (Goh & Burns, 2021; Kim et al., 2025).

Overall, the qualitative findings suggest that RT functioned as both a fluency-enhancing and awareness-raising pedagogical approach, supporting students’ oral reading development while fostering realistic self-assessment and sustained motivation.

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the effects of RT on Thai EFL university students' reading fluency and explored learners' perceptions of how RT influenced their reading development. The quantitative findings showed that students who participated in RT achieved greater improvements in overall reading fluency than those who received traditional reading instruction. The qualitative findings further revealed that these improvements were associated with repeated meaningful practice, expressive performance, peer-supported learning, and increased awareness of their own reading abilities. Together, these findings suggest that the effectiveness of RT may lie not simply in having students read the same scripts repeatedly, but in the integration of repetition with purposeful communication and social interaction.

One of the most notable findings was the particularly strong improvement in phrasing, followed by smoothness, expression, and pronunciation among students in the RT group. The large gain in phrasing suggests that RT helped learners move beyond reading text word by word toward processing language in meaningful units. This interpretation is supported by students' reflections that they were able to read more continuously rather than focusing on individual words. In traditional EFL reading instruction, learners often devote substantial attention to vocabulary recognition and grammatical analysis, which may result in fragmented reading patterns. In contrast, RT requires learners to repeatedly rehearse connected texts while considering characters, emotions, and intended meanings. Such meaningful rehearsal may encourage learners to attend to larger linguistic units and develop more natural oral reading patterns. This finding extends previous research indicating that fluent reading involves not only accurate word recognition but also the ability to group words appropriately and convey meaning through prosodic features (Kuhn & Schwanenflugel, 2019; Rasinski et al., 2022).

The substantial improvement in smoothness provides further insight into the role of RT in developing oral reading fluency. Smoothness reflects the ability to maintain continuous and effortless reading, which requires efficient coordination between word recognition and oral production. The present findings suggest that repeated performance of meaningful scripts may have helped learners reduce hesitation and increase automaticity. Unlike isolated pronunciation or vocabulary practice, RT provided multiple opportunities for students to encounter and produce the same language patterns in connected discourse. This repeated exposure may have strengthened familiarity with words and phrases, allowing students to allocate greater attention to fluent delivery rather than decoding individual words. Previous studies have similarly emphasized that RR and performance-based approaches can promote automaticity by increasing learners' opportunities for accurate and meaningful oral practice (National Reading Panel, 2000; Rasinski et al., 2020).

The improvement in expression and pronunciation also highlights the distinctive contribution of RT beyond conventional reading practice. Expression requires readers to interpret the meaning of a text and communicate it through appropriate stress, intonation, and emotion. Students' reflections indicated that performing different characters encouraged them to pay greater attention to emotional expression and intonation. Similarly, pronunciation improvement may be explained by the combination of repeated rehearsal, teacher modeling,

and immediate feedback during RT activities. The present findings therefore support previous research suggesting that explicit pronunciation support integrated into meaningful communication activities can enhance Thai EFL learners' oral language development (Ruengwatthakee, 2021; Tantiwich & Sinwongsawat, 2021; Wilang et al., 2025).

Beyond measurable gains in fluency, the qualitative findings provide important insights into the affective mechanisms underlying RT. Students frequently described RT as enjoyable, lively, and less stressful than traditional reading activities. These perceptions are significant because many EFL learners experience anxiety when reading aloud due to concerns about pronunciation errors and public performance. The collaborative and performance-oriented nature of RT appeared to create a supportive environment in which students could practice repeatedly without the pressure of individual evaluation. This finding aligns with research indicating that engaging and low-anxiety learning environments can increase learners' motivation and willingness to participate in language learning activities (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Thongtai, 2023). Thus, RT may contribute to fluency development indirectly by increasing students' willingness to engage in repeated oral reading practice.

Peer collaboration emerged as another important factor explaining students' experiences with RT. The participants reported that working with classmates allowed them to seek assistance, exchange ideas, and overcome difficulties during rehearsal. These findings suggest that RT transformed reading from an individual skill-building activity into a socially supported learning process. From a sociocultural perspective, interaction with peers and teachers provides scaffolding that enables learners to perform beyond what they may achieve independently (Vygotsky, 1978). Previous studies of RT in EFL contexts have similarly emphasized that collaborative rehearsal creates additional opportunities for oral practice while reducing learners' anxiety and increasing engagement (Ruengwatthakee, 2021; Thienkalaya & Chusanachoti, 2020).

An additional insight from the qualitative findings was that RT enhanced students' awareness of their own learning needs. Although students reported improvements, several participants identified remaining challenges related to pronunciation, intonation, and emotional expression. Rather than suggesting limited effectiveness of RT, these reflections indicate that students developed greater metacognitive awareness of the characteristics of fluent reading. Through repeated practice, performance, and feedback, learners became more capable of evaluating their own strengths and weaknesses. This finding supports research emphasizing that reflective learning and self-monitoring contribute to greater learner autonomy and continued language development (Goh & Burns, 2021).

Taken together, the findings suggest that RT contributed to reading fluency development through the interaction of cognitive, affective, and social processes. Cognitively, RT provided repeated exposure to connected texts that supported automaticity, phrasing, and smoothness. Affectively, it increased enjoyment and confidence by creating meaningful opportunities for performance. Socially, it enabled peer-supported rehearsal and collaborative learning. Therefore, the contribution of this study is not merely that RT improved reading fluency scores, but that it demonstrates how a performance-based approach can address multiple

dimensions of fluency development among Thai EFL learners. In particular, the findings highlight the potential of RT as a context-sensitive pedagogy that supports both the technical and experiential aspects of learning to read fluently in a foreign language context.

Implications of the findings

The findings of this study provide several implications for EFL teachers, teacher educators, and curriculum designers. First, the results suggest that reading fluency instruction should include systematic opportunities for students to engage in repeated oral reading and meaningful text performance. Rather than relying primarily on comprehension questions or silent reading activities, teachers may incorporate RT as a supplementary approach to provide learners with opportunities to practice connected-text reading, develop phrasing and expression, and receive feedback on their oral reading performance. This implication is consistent with established fluency research emphasizing the value of RR, guided practice, and explicit attention to prosodic features in developing fluent reading (National Reading Panel, 2000; Rasinski, 2004).

Furthermore, the 60-minute weekly session also appears to provide a practical and manageable time frame for implementing RT with university EFL students. The session was structured into a 15-minute mini-lesson, 30 minutes of guided practice and rehearsal, and a 15-minute performance, allowing sufficient time for explicit instruction, repeated practice, and meaningful performance without placing excessive demands on classroom time. This structure may also help teachers balance fluency-focused practice with other instructional objectives within a regular class period. However, the optimal duration may vary depending on class size, learners' proficiency levels, and the complexity of the scripts.

Second, the findings highlight the importance of creating supportive and low-anxiety environments for oral reading development, particularly in EFL contexts where students may hesitate to read aloud due to concerns about pronunciation and accuracy. Teachers implementing RT should therefore provide sufficient rehearsal time, encourage peer support, and view performance as a learning process rather than merely an assessment activity. Such practices can help learners participate more actively and develop greater confidence in using English orally (Thongtai, 2023).

Third, the findings have implications for the design and implementation of RT activities. Effective RT instruction requires careful selection of texts that match learners' proficiency levels, appropriate teacher modeling, and guided support throughout the rehearsal process, allowing learners to read the same text multiple times (Young et al., 2019). Teachers should not assume that performance alone will automatically lead to fluency development; instead, instructional support, including vocabulary preparation, pronunciation guidance, and feedback on expression and intonation, should be integrated into RT implementation. This approach is particularly relevant for EFL learners, who may require explicit support in developing oral reading skills.

Finally, this study suggests that RT can serve as a valuable pedagogical option for Thai EFL classrooms by addressing both skill development and learner engagement. The combination of RR, collaboration, and meaningful performance provides learners with additional opportunities to interact with English texts and experience reading as an active process. For teacher education programs, introducing RT as part of reading methodology courses may help preservice teachers develop practical strategies for promoting oral reading fluency among future learners.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effects of RT on Thai EFL university students' reading fluency using a mixed-methods approach. The findings showed that RT resulted in significantly greater improvements in overall reading fluency than traditional instruction, particularly in phrasing, smoothness, expression, and pronunciation. Qualitative findings further indicated that RT supported students' fluency development through meaningful repetition, expressive practice, and collaborative learning. Overall, this study highlights RT as a valuable performance-based approach for developing both the cognitive and affective dimensions of oral reading fluency in Thai EFL contexts.

Limitations of the study

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the participants were drawn from a single public university in central Thailand. As a result, the findings should be interpreted within this educational context. Second, the study evaluated the participants' reading fluency immediately after the 12-week intervention. Consequently, the durability of the observed improvements beyond the intervention period remains unknown. Third, the RT intervention was implemented by a single instructor who was familiar with the instructional procedures. Therefore, the findings may have been influenced by teacher-specific implementation practices. Finally, students' experiences with RT were explored through written open-ended responses only. Although this approach provided valuable insights into learners' perceptions, it may not have captured the depth and complexity of their experiences that could be obtained through additional qualitative data sources.

Recommendations for future research

Future research should investigate the long-term effects of RT on reading fluency to determine whether the observed improvements are sustained over time. In addition, researchers are encouraged to examine the application of RT in developing other language skills, such as listening, speaking, and writing, to better understand its broader impact on overall English language proficiency. Comparative studies involving learners of different proficiency levels or age groups would also be valuable in identifying how RT can be adapted to meet the needs of diverse learner populations. Furthermore, qualitative and mixed-methods research focusing on students' perceptions and affective factors, including motivation, engagement,

and enjoyment, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the educational benefits and implementation of RT.

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Appendix A Scoring Rubric

Scoring Rubric for Reading Fluency and Pronunciation

Criteria	4	3	2	1
Expression and Volume	Reads with varied volume and expression. The reader sounds like they are talking to a friend with their voice matching the interpretation of the passage.	Reads with volume and expression. However, sometimes the reader slips into expressionless reading and does not sound like they are talking to a friend.	Reads in a quiet voice. The reading sounds natural in part of the text, but the reader does not always sound like they are talking to a friend.	Reads in a quiet voice as if to get words out. The reading does not sound natural like talking to a friend.
Phrasing	Reads with good phrasing; adhering to punctuation, stress and intonation.	Reads with a mixture of run-ons, mid sentence pauses for breath, and some chopiness. There is reasonable stress and intonation	Reads in two or three word phrases, not adhering to punctuation, stress and intonation.	Reads word-by-word in a monotone voice.
Smoothness	Reads smoothly with some breaks, but self corrects with difficult words and/ or sentence structure.	Reads with occasional breaks in rhythm. Thereader has difficulty with specific words and/or sentence structures	Reads with extended pauses or hesitations. The reader has many "rough spots."	Frequently hesitates while reading, sounds out words, and repeats words or phrases. The reader makes multiple attempts to read the same passage.
Pace	Reads at a conversational pace throughout the reading.	Reads fast and slow throughout reading.	Reads moderately slowly.	Reads slowly and laboriously.
Pronunciation	Pronunciation is effortless to understand.	Pronunciation requires little effort to understand.	Pronunciation requires some effort to understand.	Pronunciation is effortful to understand.

Total Score = _____/20 Rater: _____ Date: _____

Comments:

Appendix B

Fourteen-Week Lesson Plan for the Control and Experimental Groups

Week	Topic	Experimental Group (Readers Theater Intervention)	Control Group (Traditional Reading Instruction)
1	Baseline Assessment	• Pretest: Individual oral reading recording (150-word passage from Little red riding hood, CEFR A2).	• Pretest: Individual oral reading recording (150-word passage from Little red riding hood, CEFR A2).
2–5	Script 1 Cycle: The hen (Aesop's fable)	• Mini-Lesson (15 mins): Introduction to targeted reading fluency skills (accuracy, rate, phrasing, or expression). • Practice (30 mins): - <i>New script introduction (Week 2):</i> Teacher models fluent reading, clarifies vocabulary, and explains storyline/characters. - <i>Subsequent weeks (Weeks 3-5):</i> RR, collaborative rehearsal, and comprehension discussions regarding character roles and emotions. • Performance (15 mins): Script performance in front of peers, applying fluency and expressive skills.	• Mini-Lesson (15 mins): Introduction to targeted reading fluency skills (accuracy, rate, word stress, or intonation). • Practice (30 mins): Individual practice of short reading passages focusing on accuracy, rate, word stress, and intonation. Immediate feedback provided by the researcher. • Performance (15 mins): Reading short passages aloud for peer and instructor feedback.
6–9	Script 2 Cycle: Sangthong (Thai folktale)	• Mini-Lesson (15 mins): Continuous explicit instruction on targeted fluency features. • Practice (30 mins): - <i>New script introduction (Week 6):</i> Teacher models fluent reading, clarifies vocabulary, and explains storyline/characters. - <i>Subsequent weeks (Weeks 7-9):</i> RR, collaborative rehearsal, and comprehension discussions regarding character roles and emotions. • Performance (15 mins): Script performance in front of peers, applying fluency and expressive skills.	• Mini-Lesson (15 mins): Introduction to targeted reading fluency skills (accuracy, rate, word stress, or intonation). • Practice (30 mins): Individual practice of short reading passages focusing on accuracy, rate, word stress, and intonation. Immediate feedback provided by the researcher. • Performance (15 mins): Reading short passages aloud for peer and instructor feedback.

Week	Topic	Experimental Group (Readers Theater Intervention)	Control Group (Traditional Reading Instruction)
10–13	Script 3 Cycle: Doraemon (Japanese cartoon)	• Mini-Lesson (15 mins): Continuous explicit instruction on targeted fluency features. • Practice (30 mins): - <i>New script introduction (Week 10):</i> Teacher models fluent reading, clarifies vocabulary, and explains storyline/characters. - <i>Subsequent weeks (Weeks 11-13):</i> RR, collaborative rehearsal, and comprehension discussions regarding character roles and emotions. • Performance (15 mins): Script performance in front of peers, applying fluency and expressive skills.	• Mini-Lesson (15 mins): Introduction to targeted reading fluency skills (accuracy, rate, word stress, or intonation). • Practice (30 mins): Individual practice of short reading passages focusing on accuracy, rate, word stress, and intonation. Immediate feedback provided by the researcher. • Performance (15 mins): Reading short passages aloud for peer and instructor feedback.
14		• Posttest: Individual oral reading assessment using the same baseline passage. • Qualitative Data Collection: Completion of written open-ended reflection questionnaires (in Thai)	• Posttest: Individual oral reading assessment using the same baseline passage.