

The Power of Narrow Reading

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Abstract

Focusing on a single topic or on the work of a single writer rather than attempting to read a wide variety of texts helps learners become familiar with the context, which makes the language input more comprehensible. Some of the major benefits of narrow reading include increased motivation in reading as well as learning and better understanding of texts which may otherwise be beyond their current competence.

We live in a time of globalization. Throughout the world, English has become the *lingua franca* of business and international communication. In order to gain access to much of the world's information and knowledge it is imperative these days to be able to read and understand English. Although English is widely taught in Thailand with the four language skills (reading, speaking, writing and listening) emphasized, reading is the main tool of Thai university students for gaining information from journals, magazines, articles, research reports and other printed materials. Paulston & Bruder (1976, p.157) identified reading as the most important skill for most students of English on a worldwide basis. The main goal of reading is to comprehend what we read in order to garner information; however, not all university level students achieve this objective (Manasuntorn, K., 1975). Despite the fact that the importance of English is widely accepted, only limited success in teaching English has been achieved in Thailand.

As stated earlier, reading skills are especially vital and useful for English language learners (and for the learners of all languages). Several studies have been conducted to focus on the importance of acquiring reading skills. Vanitchareontum, P. (1982, p.46) investigated the reading and language competencies of first-year students at Srinakhrinwirot University. This study revealed that both reading and language skills in general were substandard. Wongsotorn, A. (1988) examined the English reading-competence level of students. Her study showed that the reading ability of high-school and tertiary students should be improved.

Such studies as those mentioned above have demonstrated that the reading ability of Thai students is still poor, and therefore needs improvement. There are probably many causes for these reading problems such as outdated course books, inappropriate teaching methodology, and lack of input. Sukrungson, K. (1987, p.4) identified some of the causes of students' reading problems in his study. These included students having vocabulary problems and not being able to find the meaning of unknown words from context clues as well as students not being able to identify the main ideas and supporting details in reading texts, etc. Students cannot comprehend the text well because they lack an adequate reading vocabulary and the motivation to look up words in a dictionary. Consequently, they get bored easily and give up reading practice altogether. One way we can address this issue is readily apparent: Teachers can help students comprehend messages and structures that are difficult by putting more emphasis on vocabulary (Krashen, 1984, p.80). Furthermore, Paran (2003, p.40) mentioned that readers need to know most of words in a text in order to understand a text. He said that they needed to understand at least 95% of the words in a text to fully understand it. Currently, there are many

interesting teaching methods that can help students increase their reading vocabulary which will, in turn, develop their reading ability. One of these methods is using narrow reading.

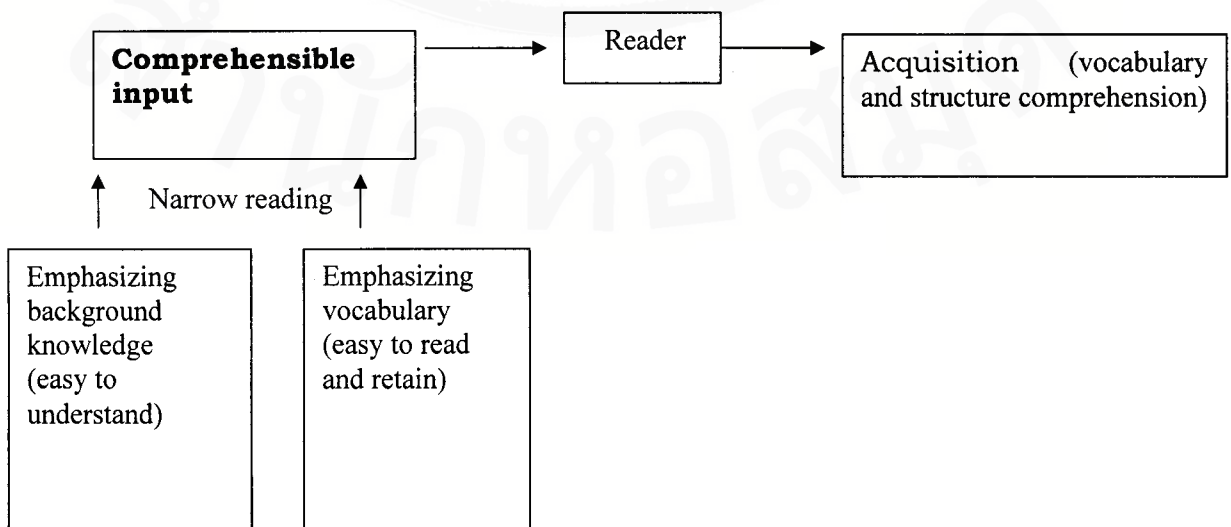
The goal of this paper is to discuss the empirical support for narrow reading, why it is important, and to explore its pedagogical application in L2/FL learning.

What is narrow reading?

According to Buckingham and Clifton(2001), narrow reading is reading on the same topic, books by the same author, and/or in the same area/genre. Krashen (1996,p.97) suggests that narrow reading focuses on the work of a single author or reading a great deal about a single topic that the reader is interested in rather than attempting to read a wide variety of texts. According to these definitions of narrow reading, readers specialize in the work of a single author or just read books or a series of books on one particular topic or theme. Readers will familiarize themselves with a writer's style, idiomatic usage, and vocabulary in that topic or discourse. Narrow reading helps ensure more comprehensible input because the more one reads, the more one will have background knowledge in a particular topic from a previous context to help them understand the current context.

Theory behind narrow reading

The concept underpinning narrow reading is Krashen's input hypothesis. Krashen (1984) states that comprehensible input is seen as the key factor that enables acquisition. If input is not comprehensible, the learner will not be able to acquire any language. Furthermore, receiving a sufficient quantity of comprehensible input is also important. Hatch, 1978a; Krashen, 1981 in Krashen, 1984,p.80-81 argued that to help learners understand more of what is read, it is important to provide them with sufficient vocabulary. If their knowledge of vocabulary is not enough for understanding all messages, there is little doubt that an increased vocabulary will help the acquirer understand more of what is heard or read. Therefore, more vocabulary should mean more comprehensible input and more acquisition of grammar. According to the input hypothesis and the definition of narrow reading, this theory can be made clearer in the figure below.



According to the above diagram, it can be stated that readers will obtain sufficient background knowledge and vocabulary to support them in improving acquisition in their reading ability. Students won't feel too much stress because they can understand the text more easily. That means readers improve their reading skills comfortably and gradually expand the range of their reading (Krashen, 2004, p.17-19). Then, students will be motivated to read more and more and can read for pleasure or ultimately do more extensive reading in general.

Why is narrow reading important?

1. *To familiarize readers with a writer's idiomatic usage, style, vocabulary and discourse in any genre.*

This is mentioned because the more one reads, the more one understands. It is easier for readers to understand a text when they are familiar with the writing style, vocabulary and discourse in any genre. Lamme (1976 in Krashen, 2004) found that good readers in English as a first language prefer to read books by one particular writer or books from a series. Cho and Krashen (1994) reported that there is considerable enthusiasm for reading and substantial vocabulary development among adult second-language learners who read books in the *Sweet Valley* series. Learners rapidly move from second-grade level (*Sweet Valley Kids*) to fourth-grade level (*Sweet Valley Twins*) and to fifth- and sixth-grade levels (*Sweet Valley High*). Some of the learners hadn't read books in English for pleasure before, but they changed to become fanatic Sweet Valley fans. The result also pointed out that it is likely that much of the participants' vocabulary growth came from reading.

2. *To help ensure comprehensible input*

The reader has the advantage of the previous context to help him or her understand a current text and will acquire more and more background knowledge by reading. It can be said that background knowledge is a tremendous facilitator of comprehension.

Narrow readers gain more contextual knowledge as they read narrowly. The more one reads in one area, the more one learns about the particular area, and the easier one finds subsequent reading in their area (and the more one acquires the language) (Krashen, 2004, p.18)

Wesche (in Krashen, 2004, p.18) provided an example of how narrow reading helps ensure comprehensible input. The study was called "the first few pages". Intermediate foreign-language students, reading a novel in a foreign language, often report that they find the first few pages of the new author's work tough going. Once they pass through the difficulty in the first part of the text, the rest of the book goes much more easily. Moreover, Yang (2001, p.451-466) investigated the effects of reading mystery novels on Hong Kong adult learners studying English for the purposes of pleasure and/or career development. He asked students to read two novels by the same author. These two novels share the same characters that develop as the novels progress. By emphasizing the same characters and understanding the context of the story, students can develop the sense of unity and continuity. They also feel free from struggling through background knowledge each time they pick up a new piece. Yang (2001, p. 451-466) pointed that reading a single author's work allows students to see the development of a writing style and

the writer's viewpoint. Some subjects of the study said that they felt it difficult to read at the beginning because reading a 250-page English novel was scary; but they found ease in reading later, especially when all the major characters in the books had reappeared.

3. *To improve reading skills comfortably and gradually to expand the range of reading.*

According to the foregoing definitions of narrow reading and the explanation of how narrow reading is important, it can be said that readers who read narrowly should feel comfortable in reading. They shouldn't feel difficulty or stress when reading. Krashen and Cho (1994, p.667) mentioned that narrow reading does not typically stay narrow. Just as first-language readers gradually widen their reading selections, LaBrant (1958 in Krashen, 2004,p.18) also reported that high school students gradually expand their reading interests as they read more.

Given the importance of narrow reading as stated above, it may be said that narrow reading provides motivation to the readers. Krashen (2004,p. 18) argued that the clearest advantage of narrow reading is that it is very motivating. When readers enjoy reading, readers will get hooked on reading and read more and more. Their reading ability will increase and they will be successful in the world of reading.

How can narrow reading be applied to English teaching in the Thai context?

In the case of Thai students, it is quite difficult to get students to practice reading by themselves without guidance. Thus, one alternative for teachers is teaching reading through narrow reading. Teachers can do many activities in class. For example, providing students with handouts on the same topic or genre. Students may be asked to read novels written by the same writer or books in a series such as *Harry Potter*, detective novels by Agatha Christie, or an adventure series by Edith Blyton. Renandya (2004) recalls his previous reading experiences and remembers reading a thriller, the Famous Perry Mason series, which got him hooked into reading. He found that a vast amount of reading developed his reading ability and grammar. Furthermore, newspapers are a perfect resource to find material for narrow reading. It is easy and safe to prepare such kinds of material. News stories often continue for many days. The more you read, the more the story becomes familiar and easier to understand day by day (Pakthai, 2001). Newspapers focus on certain types of topics, such as politics, crime, environment, and the activities of famous people as well. Let's try the example of narrow reading activities below. You can see how interesting they are and how we can use newspapers as a source of stories or articles in order to practice reading through narrow reading.

Activity One

*Read the story and pay particular attention to the vocabulary in **bold** letters. They are all words or phrases commonly found in flood stories.*

Depression Kaemi unsettles northeastern region

Two villagers swept away by the currents

Flash floods **spawned** by depression Kaemi struck several northeastern provinces yesterday.

Among the affected provinces, Surin was badly hit and many of its areas were **inundated**. Two villagers were reportedly **swept away** by the currents and their bodies had yet to be **recovered**.

The depression, which is now moving to **blanket** the Northeast, has brought heavy rain to Tha Tum, Chom Phra, Samrong Thap, Sikhorphum, Sangkha and Muang districts.

Provincial authorities yesterday sent flat-bottom boats to **evacuate** flood victims to higher grounds. Rice and other food **relief** items were distributed to the affected families.

In Ubon Ratchathani, eight districts were inundated. Many roads became **impassable** and hundreds of rai of farmland were **submerged** in floodwaters.

In Warin Chamrap district, four houses were swept away, ten other houses and two temples were also damaged. One woman died after she accidentally fell into an **overflowing weir**. **Rescue workers** tried in vain to retrieve the body of Mrs Tim Saipet, 39.

The northeastern **meteorological** centre said Kaemi, which is now entering Maha Sarakham province, will cause flooding in ten more provinces.

In Nakhon Ratchasima, some 40,000 rai of agricultural areas were damaged. Floods were reported in ten districts, including the municipality areas where the flood water level was about 50-100 cm high.

Flood-related vocabulary from the story Notice that some of the easier vocabulary like "damaged" and "water level" are left out.	
depression an area of low pressure which often results in heavy rain flash floods sudden and powerful floods swept away (past tense of sweep away) carried or pushed away with great force current a movement of water spawned formed inundated(inundate) covered with water recovered found blanket to cover evacuate to take out of an area; to cause to leave relief assistance (supplies of food, medicine; equipment, etc.)	Impassable impossible to pass or go through submerged (submerge) covered with water overflowing going over the edges (of a river, a container, etc.) weir a wall-like structure across a river which helps control its flow rescue workers people who help other people who are in danger or who have suffered from an unfortunate experience in vain unsuccessfully retrieve to find; to recover; to get back meteorological relating to the science of understanding and predicting the weather

Activity Two

Below are three more flood stories. Read them carefully. (1) Underline any key words from the first story that are also found in the stories below. (2) Find additional key words to add to the list from the first story. Be sure to include their meanings. With these words, you will have an excellent start towards reading and understanding almost any flood story you run across in the future.

More villages hit as heavy rains continue

Roads and railway tracks impassable

Ten villages in Chumphon province and eight in Prachuap Khiri Khan were hit by floods yesterday morning.

Water from the Tha Ta Pao river and two canals in Muang district inundated villages in tambons Khun Saen, Na Cha-ang, Tha Thung and Tha Yang after water was drained to the waterways.

Strong floodwater caused damage to many houses in the area, prompting the province to deploy security forces to help evacuate flood victims.

Staff from the provincial Red Cross were sent to hand out food and other necessities to the affected villagers.

An initial survey showed more than 1,200 houses and shrimp farms covering 200 rai along the canals were inundated.

In Prachuap Khiri Khan, forest *runoffs* inundated eight villages in tambon Tabtai, causing damage to many roads and some bridges.

A section of Phet Kasem highway between Hua Hin district and Cha-am district of Phetchaburi were also impassable. In Hua Hin, floodwater at Khao Takiab village was up to 1.7m high even though water *receded* in many other areas in the municipality.

Surat Thani-Bangkok special express train was *stranded* at Hua Hin railway station because a section of the track was 30cm underwater. The heavy floods also suspended the operations of ten more south-bound trains.

Samarn Wongwarayudh, director of the Civil Defence Centre, warned residents of Rayong, Phetchaburi, Prachuap Khiri Khan and Chumphon provinces to brace for more flash floods this week. The volume of rain in the Central, Eastern and Southern regions will drop and sea winds will weaken with the low pressure front along the upper part of the Gulf of Thailand.

More rain predicted in flooded Northeast

Torrents tear holes in wall of prison

Floods continued to wreak *havoc* in the Northeast, with *weathermen* warning yesterday of worse to come.

A new low pressure wedge cutting across the northern and northeastern region was expected to add more to the flood woes in those parts of the country, the weathermen said.

People in Phetchabun, Lop Buri, Prachin Buri, Khon Kaen, Amnat Charoen, Yasothorn, Ubon Ratchathani, Roi-et, Surin, Si Saket, Buri Ram and Nakhon Ratchasima should brace for more rain and subsequent flash floods as a result, they warned.

Many northeastern provinces have been under *swirling floodwaters* in the past several days, following heavy rainfall caused by a depression.

In Si Sa Ket, *torrential* rain had created flash floods which tore holes in the walls of the provincial prison, and shook a rail bridge leading to the provincial town.

Inmates had to be evacuated to safer grounds, while a Bangkok-bound train was forced to return to Ubon Ratchathani to avoid possible danger from the flood-threatened rail bridge in Si Sa Ket.

Some 400,000 people in 20 districts have either been made homeless or were *marooned* by the floods, which damaged 233 roads, 19 bridges and 15 *dykes*.

Kosin Ketthong, the provincial governor, said initial damages were estimated at 200 million baht.

Banyat Bantadnan, the deputy prime minister and interior minister, said he had instructed provincial governors to mobilise relief operations to help the people

Drainage channels give respite from inundation

Measures cut water levels by 50-75%

Yuthapong Kamnodnae in Udon Thani

The flood level in Udon Thani receded yesterday after a channel was dug across a highway and another at the base of a railway to drain water.

A steel structure sent from Bangkok was positioned to reinforce a railway track, of which the base was removed to let water run through. A temporary bridge was also installed over a channel dug across the Udon Thani-Sakon Nakhon highway.

Water was earlier discharged from Ban Chan reservoir to stop dykes from *rupturing* under the heavy rainwater. The water flooded into the town, causing the worst *deluge* in 100 years.

Water from the reservoir was drained out from the two openings but this caused villages and suburbs to flood. Some of the water was also pumped out. The water level in the municipality dropped to 20-50cm from 80-100cm allowing the Udon Thani-Khon Kaen highway to be reopened to traffic.

Of the 47 square- kilometre municipality, about 45 square kilometres were flooded. Damage to public utilities was estimated at 213 million baht, the governor said. Eleven villages in Tambon Samphrao and many farms were also flooded when water was drained out of the town.

Sources: www.Bangkokpost.net

The two activities above are on the same topic: floods. You can also find more stories about floods from newspapers. Students may have difficulties in reading the story in *Activity One* because of the unfamiliar writing style, vocabulary and their lack of background knowledge. When students get the meaning of all the key words relating to floods (you can see in vocabulary list), it will be easier for them to read the next stories in *Activity Two*. In *Activity Two*, there are three stories about floods. Students can see some new vocabulary relating to floods (italic words) and also the same vocabulary (underlined words) from *Activity One*.

Students can add the new vocabulary to the vocabulary list in *Activity One*. In studying vocabulary this way it is easier for them to memorize the words. Students can create their own vocabulary-mapping based on the topic that they are studying. Some of the vocabulary may be synonyms or antonyms of each other such as **inundate** and **submerge** in activity one. I believe that practising vocabulary in this way will assist with student retention of the vocabulary.

Students also can see the same writing style each story. Students will gradually feel more comfortable when they read each story in *Activity Two* because they have enough input (vocabulary, background knowledge) and are familiar with the writing style. During these activities, the teacher can ask them questions to check their comprehension and to guide them in analyzing the story. Teachers may use various questioning techniques such as the Question-Answer Relationships technique and Reciprocal Questioning. The teacher should offer the students suggestions on how to guess the meaning of words by using clues. Moreover, teachers may guide them to pay attention to the pattern of writing in news stories of this kind. The teacher can provide some reading tasks to test student comprehension as well.

Additionally, the teacher can provide them with other topics using the same procedure of activities. When students practice more and more and they also find that they comprehend stories, they will feel more comfortable and confident to read and become more interested in reading more extensively. Later, they will enjoy reading and can read not only for information but also for pleasure. Please bear in mind that the teacher should explain the concept of narrow reading and how it is useful for them at the beginning of the course. When students understand the concepts and uses of practicing reading with narrow reading activities, they will be more eager and attentive to study and practice. Otherwise, they may feel too bored to read.

One more interesting point of practicing reading through narrow reading is students not only learn more vocabulary about a topic, but they also can extend newly acquired vocabulary to use in other contexts. Krashen (2004, P.17) said that deep reading in any topic will provide exposure to a vast amount of syntax and vocabulary which can be useful in other areas. Narrow reading activities are very useful for students who have limitations in vocabulary.

In addition, narrow reading is useful for supporting extensive reading. Paran notes that it is not enough for students to practice reading through extensive reading only. They need a more focused approach, including explicit instruction (Paran,2003,p.40). As you know, extensive reading offers many advantages, some of which are as follows:

1. enhanced language learning in such areas as spelling, vocabulary, grammar and text structure
 2. increased knowledge of the world
 3. improved reading and writing skills
 4. greater enjoyment of reading
 5. more positive attitude toward reading
 6. higher possibility of developing a reading habit
- (Day&Bamford, 1998; Krashen,1993; Nation,1997 in Renandya & Jacob,2003,p.298)

In order to derive greater benefits from extensive reading, readers have to read large quantities of books and material. However, it is difficult for students who cannot read well to benefit from extensive reading. They may feel bored and frustrated when reading. Feuerstein and Scholnik (1995:11) said that poor and unmotivated readers find it difficult to understand what they read. Thus, they do not enjoy reading and they read less. Poor readers need more suggestions and the teacher's attention. They need motivation from teachers. Narrow Reading can help them comprehend what they read little by little. Students may also feel comfortable in practicing reading.

In addition, practicing reading through narrow reading is useful for practicing writing. Since students have to read the same genres of writing such as news reporting, novels, technical reports and journals, etc. extensively, they will become familiarized with the writing style of each genre. Then, they can also write their own papers or stories because they have enough vocabulary and writing pattern skills.

In conclusion, it is possible that readers will be motivated after practicing reading through narrow reading techniques. Narrow reading should help them feel comfortable and confident to read since they will know more vocabulary and have more background knowledge. Readers will enjoy reading, get hooked on reading and ultimately be able to read over a wider range.

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