

‘Narrow Reading’ Techniques to Enhance Students’ Vocabulary and Reading Skills

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Abstract

This study explored an interesting and in many ways urgent under-researched area — ‘narrow reading’ — on English as a foreign language (EFL) learners’ reading fluency and vocabulary perceptions. Although ‘narrow reading’ is not a newly coined term, very little research has been done on it both in Uzbekistan and in the world. ‘Narrow reading’ refers to readers focusing on the work of a single author or a single topic over the course of a number of texts for an extended period of time. It can also be considered another approach to (or a subset of) extensive reading (wide reading), but the two differ in how texts are selected or organized. ‘Narrow reading’ may provide some optimal conditions, such as better background knowledge and repetition of key lexical items.

Keywords: reading, vocabulary, technique, ‘narrow reading’, reading fluency, reading comprehension, word-stock.

1.0. Introduction

This article is concerned with vocabulary acquisition and reading. Some views held by teachers and researchers are in line with the idea that the higher the exposure to vocabulary through reading, the better. Others maintain that there is no better way to acquire vocabulary than when students are consciously working with vocabulary itself. From a pedagogical point of view, this reflects a distinction between incidental and intentional learning. The former “occurs when the mind is focused elsewhere” and therefore students are unconscious of the learning process (Decarrico, 2001: 289). On the contrary, in intentional learning students “are aware of the fact that they are participating in a formal learning task” (Dörnyei, 2009: 140-141). In terms of reading, this incidental versus intentional dichotomy is directly related to narrow reading, on the one hand, and reading plus vocabulary enhancement activities, on the other.

This research describes eight ‘narrow reading’ techniques that have significantly enhanced my students’ vocabulary and reading skills. As explained in some previous publications in this area (Anderson, 1999; Cho, K. S., Ahn, K. O., & Krashen, S. D., 2005; Carver, 2010; Webb & Chang, 2015; Kang, 2015), ‘narrow reading’ is a powerful technique based on the concept that getting your students to go over and over the same text through a range of comprehension tasks may be tedious for them; whilst by creating several reading passages (I tend to use three to six) that are very similar in terms of topic, structure, vocabulary and patterns, you will still be recycling the same target linguistic features but through a wider range of texts adding in and allowing for more variety.

In my experience, ‘narrow reading’ texts are most effective, when they:

- are near-identical in terms of patterns;
- contain comprehensible input (90% accessible in meaning without resorting to dictionaryed or extra-textual help);
- are relatively short (very short for absolute beginners, of course).

The activities I usually ask my students to perform on ‘narrow reading’ texts are different from the typical ‘true or false’, ‘who, where, what, when, etc.’ or other classical comprehension questions, because such tasks often encourage skimming and scanning, educated guesswork and picking details, rather than processing texts in a more thorough and meticulous way. Skimming and scanning, educated guesswork and inferencing are obviously very important skills (Day, 2015), which should be fostered in the L2 classroom (Chang, 2022). However, I want my students to process the texts in their entirety paying attention to as much text as possible, in order to intensify the students’ exposure to the vocabulary and patterns I intend to recycle. Hence, what I have done over the years, is trying to come up with tasks which, whilst being engaging and involving problem-solving, aim to get them to do just that. In sum, the main aim of ‘narrow reading’ tasks is to ‘trick’ the students into processing (Grabe, 2019) what is basically the same text over and over again whilst making them read six. In this sense, they are possibly one of the most effective recycling tools ever, allowing L2 teachers to expose their learners to the core items in their syllabi many times over throughout the duration of the academic year.

2.0. Eight Effective 'Narrow Reading' Techniques

The eight techniques described below, are 'narrow reading' tasks that I carry out in my lessons, day in day out and my students enjoy. Obviously, they are contextualized in the topic-at-hand.

1. Spot the differences – This is a narrow reading activity which typically involves 3 to 6 texts (the more the better) of around 100 words that are completely identical apart from a few key details. The task is for the students to spot such details in each text which are different from all the other five texts. So if text A in line 3 reads 'she is tall' all the other texts will read at the same line 'she is short' or 'she is average height'. Obviously, you can make it into a competition under time constraints with the right group. The rationale for the activity is to trick the students into reading the same texts three to six times over (thereby recycling the same lexis, patterns and grammar) whilst giving them a task which requires them to pay attention to the slightest detail in order to find the differences. As a follow-up you can do a 'Spot the differences' Listening task in which you will re-use the same texts (changing the target details of course) and will read out to them. Since the focus will be on modelling you will be reading the text at modelling, not near-native speed. Same rationale: getting them to listen to the same text and patterns over and over again.

2. Bad translation – 'Bad translation' is another very effective 'narrow reading' technique I use a lot. It consists of a set of very similar texts (typical 3 or 4) and their respective translations. The task is for the students to spot four or five mistakes the teacher deliberately made in the translation to lay emphasis on certain vocabulary or structures. This forces the students to really process the Target language texts in great detail and learn vocabulary incidentally as they do so. By doing this task, you are again tricking the students in re-reading the same sort of text, patterns and vocabulary several times over but with the added benefits of the L1 translation, which may result in some learning of new vocabulary in the process. The same texts can be recycled as follow-up by placing gaps in the Target Language text or in the translations. The same technique can also be turned into a Listening activity in which the students are provided with the translation and listen to the teacher as he reads the Target Language text.

3. Summaries – In this activity, the students are once again given 3 to 6 texts on the same topic, not identical but very similar in structure and language content. You summarize each text in 40-50 words in the L1 or L2, depending on the students' level. The task is for the students to find which summary matches which text. To make the task more challenging, you may want to add an extra summary or two, as distractors.

4. Picture – select an image from the internet or the textbook in use, which refers to the topic-at-hand or to specific grammar structures or patterns you want to recycle. Then create three or more narrow reading texts which describe the picture in detail. Make sure, though, that only one text and one text only is a 100% accurate description of the picture (Carver, 2012), whilst the others have one or two details in excess which do not match the picture. The task is for the students to identify the only text that matches the picture in every single detail. This task kills two birds with one stone in that not only it does enhance the students' vocabulary and reading skills but can also be used to prepare EFL students for the oral photo card task by modelling useful language and approaches to that task.

5. Questions – This 'narrow reading' technique requires a bit more work. I created it in order to focus my students not only on the content of the target texts, but also on understanding L2 questions. After creating 3 to 6 texts that are very similar in content and structure, write a set of ten or more questions in the target language, making sure that each text contains the answer to all of the questions you created but one. The students' task is to find the one question that does not apply to each specific text (i.e. there is no answer to that question in the text)

6. Overgeneralizations – This is kind of reminiscent of 'Spot the differences' (Hwang & Nation, 2019). After creating the texts, you will write ten or more statements in the target language about them which are true of all the texts except for one (e.g. 'All the people in the texts play a sport'). The students' task is to find for each of the statements the one text it does not apply to. The statement could be in English or in the L2.

7. List – Create as many narrow reading texts as you can on the same topic. Then display a long list of details in the L1 or L2 taken from the various texts and display it on the board. The task is for the students to match the information on the list to the text it comes from.

8. The most / The least – After creating the text, you will write a number of gapped sentences such as: the most positive person is...; the sportiest person is ... the biggest house is..., the person who visited most places is.... Students are tasked with filling the gaps. This technique has the added benefit of drilling in superlatives, a structure that KS3 students of French find quite difficult to acquire.

3.0. The Follow-Up

More traditional activities, classics such as true or false or other comprehension questions tasks, cloze, sorting information into categories (linguistic or semantic), ‘Find the English for the following’ etc., can of course follow and are indeed desirable as they truly enhance the power of ‘narrow reading’ tasks. The risk is staying on the same texts a bit too long, which may disengage some students. ‘Narrow listening’ tasks, recycling the same texts used for ‘narrow reading’ by changing a few details here and there are another very effective alternative, depending on the level of the students. Some classes may cope with receiving the same input aurally, some may not. You may have to shorten the texts and simplify the task, when adapting them for listening purposes. You will also have to read them at modelling speed, rather than native or near-native pace. Any other vocabulary tasks / games drilling in the language you embedded in the ‘narrow reading’ tasks will be useful before engaging in production. Structured and semi-structured ‘pushed-output’ (Bell, 2011) written and then oral tasks in which the students will be asked to re-use the same language patterns and vocabulary found in the narrow reading texts would obviously be the icing of the cake. The use of explicit learning vocabulary activities in the classroom has been claimed to be helpful for successful second language vocabulary acquisition (Nation, 2001: 157-158). These explicit activities are consciousness raising and center on receptive skills, ensuring that learners note features of the input which can help them turn it into intake (Lewis, 1998: 215). ‘Input’ is understood as the “language the learner meets”, whereas ‘intake’ would be the “language internalized by the learner in such a way that it becomes available for productive use”. Explicit learning has been described by Dörnyei (2009: 136) as a “process characterized by the learner’s conscious and deliberate attempt to master some material or solve a problem”. In this line, programs that include direct vocabulary instruction have been found to be more effective for the enlargement of vocabulary than those focusing solely on implicit treatments

4.0. Conclusion

‘Narrow reading’ tasks constitute an effective and engaging way to increase exponentially the exposure your students get to the target patterns, vocabulary and grammar structures that you want them to acquire through the written medium. Such tasks are powerful because they do not ask students to simply pick details in response to questions asking who, where and what, which may encourage some of them to simply skim and scan through texts in search of clues which may prompt educated guesses or inferences, but ‘trick’ the students into processing the texts more closely and thoroughly, whilst giving them a problem to solve. This makes enhancing the exposure to the target items more effective and engaging. To-date, ‘narrow reading’ tasks have not been sufficiently used in published instructional materials because they are not a well-known technique and are time-consuming to make. You often find clusters of texts of similar topics that share some linguistic features; however, ‘narrow reading’ texts are most effective, in my experience of using them for over a decade, when they are extremely similar in structure, repeat the same patterns over and over again and when the tasks associated with them have a problem-solving component and even a competitive element. Mounting research evidence shows ‘narrow reading’ texts do enhance students’ vocabulary. Moreover, we know from masses of empirical studies that high-frequency exposure to the same patterns (syntactic, morphological, phonetical, etc.) does sensitize students to them, thereby facilitating acquisition.

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