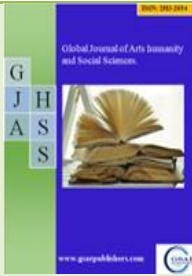
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The Benefits and Challenges of Implementing Narrow Reading

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Abstract

Why is narrow reading (NR) via graded readers not pursued more in EFL contexts? An examination of the literature on narrow reading over the last 25 years reveals that a NR approach is still finding its footing when it comes to both awareness and implementation in EFL learner contexts or even more advanced teacher-training contexts. This rings true for this author's undergraduate and graduate reading methodology courses in South Korea. This is unfortunate due to the positive lexical and motivational effects that such extensive reading (ER) provides. This paper defines ER principles, reports the literal and abstract benefits of using NR, and provides suggestions for NR implementation based on recent research. Educational implications for instruction are discussed as well as considerations for future research.

Keywords: extensive reading, narrow reading, teacher-training

Introduction and Literature Review

Extensive reading (ER) is the process of "reading large amounts with the aim of getting an overall understanding of the material" (Bamford, J. & Day, R., 1997). The ER approach has a long history of use in both native and non-native English-speaking contexts and is commonly referred to as Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) (see Krashen, 1993) or Sustained Silent Reading (SSR). While FVR is usually done in or out of the classroom, SSR is usually completed within a set classroom period.

In South Korea, SSR has become a popular practice for middle and high school students. Motivational factors such as book choice and personal reading speed are considered a few of the reasons for this use. SSR is done in a set amount of time (usually ~15 minutes per day) set aside for students to silently read a chosen text. Usually, comprehension work follows in public school classrooms. This author, however, uses Literature Circles (LCs) in a graduate school context; one reason for this is that this author feels that LCs have a stronger sharing (or, 'social') component to them.

A challenge noted by this author (Jobbitt, 2023) is that, regardless of the ER approach or program used, Korean teacher-trainees are usually unaware of what ER is, let alone NR – they simply have not been introduced to the concept of reading for pleasure over the course of their academic career. This lack of exposure may stem

from the teacher side (Renandya, et al, 2018) or from other factors. In this author's context, LCs are therefore used as an introduction to extensive reading as a program (ERPs) and its principles. Narrow reading (sometimes called 'light reading'), a subset of ER, limits the scope of reading material, and it is generally defined as reading several books from only one genre, about one subject, or from one author (Bryan, 2011, p. 117; Hadaway & Young, 2010 as cited in Hansen & Collins, 2015).

Chang and Millet (2017) define narrow reading (NR) as "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" (p1). Since these texts are related via theme or author and keywords and proper nouns are often repeated, the reader may read such texts with less difficulty or lexical burden (Chang & Millet, 2017). Short-passage reading or graded readers are commonly used for narrow reading.

While ERPs have no doubt helped promote reading and all of its ancillary benefits to both native English speakers and non-native English speakers in the past (and continue to do so), it is also true that narrow reading has been used as a form of extensive reading for several decades. Long a proponent of NR (see Krashen, 1981), in 2004, Krashen again reiterated the case for narrow reading, pronouncing that "the exposure to different topics, genres, and styles is beneficial...may be all wrong [:] it may be that narrow



input is much more efficient for second language acquisition,” and that specialization might be better applied earlier versus later (p. 17). Other researchers thought similarly and more specifically.

A sparse yet common theme as noted by Kang (2015) with regard to narrow reading research over the years has been how NR impacts L2 learners’ incidental vocabulary acquisition or lexical growth with results being overall positive. Schmitt and Carter (2000), summarily note that when students have enough word family knowledge or vocabulary knowledge (roughly 5,000 words), along with repeated exposure, they may begin to successfully read authentic texts, and hence boost their vocabulary. (See Paul Nation’s work for more on word family coverage). However, Min’s (2008) study comparing the effectiveness of reading plus vocabulary (RV) enhancement activities against narrow reading found NR to be helpful, yet less helpful than RV in boosting target vocabulary acquisition and retention. Min diplomatically states that while many methods of vocabulary acquisition may be effective, some may be more so than others. Continuing in the affirmative is a study by Kang (2015), who used thematically related materials (book excerpts, newspapers articles), and reported that such texts lead to greater understanding of the meaning of words and their appropriate use by learners.

By extension, Hansen and Collins (2015) studied the link “between narrow independent reading and ELL children’s reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge in English” (p. 139). Several lines of research emerged within this study. One major line analyzed the amount of word repetition between text collections and unrelated text collections, while a look was also taken at vocabulary repetition among informational texts in newspapers. Generally, this line of research suggested that such text collections offer readers multiple exposures to words which may assist in incidental vocabulary acquisition. A second line dealt with NR as a facilitator of English literacy for L2 learners with overall results being significantly positive for all groups examined. Generally, Hansen and Collins (2015) concluded that “the proportion of narrow books read was related to children’s growth in receptive vocabulary” and that such a finding “provides tentative evidence that narrow reading may be beneficial for children in recognizing words they read, regardless of their language status” (p. 150). A similar study on Malaysian primary students by Rajendran and Mustafa (2022) mirrored these findings.

Another important branch of research on NR related to vocabulary learning is that of the use of graded readers, which aligns more naturally with NR history. In 1999, Nation and Wang examined a corpus of 42 graded readers and concluded that learners need to read about one graded reader per week to maximize word repetition and overall retention. Graded readers are newly-written books or adapted versions of authentic books written specifically for L2 learners at specific or ‘graded’ levels. Levels usually range from a base or starter level up to six levels with the level of grammar difficulty and headword count frequency increasing from one level to the next. Graded readers are commonly used to boost L2 learners’ English input across a range of levels, but usually are found in K-12 L2 contexts, but also in collegiate L2 contexts. The

goal of using graded readers is to get L2 learners’ ability up to an ‘authentic text level’ of reading.

Just as the history of extensive reading is long and ER has been shown to be beneficial to L2 learners’ general understanding of English, the theme-based approach that is narrow reading has likewise been shown to improve students’ vocabulary learning and comprehension. To note, this paper focuses on narrow reading with graded readers and only peripherally on the more narrow use of in-class NR techniques using very short paragraphs or worksheets. Accordingly, a challenge that teachers may still have related to NR is being able to find and use a range of NR guidelines with ERPs. Teachers are busy people who do not always have time to research or apply new or adapted processes to their teaching contexts. It is the purpose of this paper to present to teachers a history of NR, the benefits of NR to students, and the implementation of NR processes via an ERP in a classroom context.

Principles for Extensive Reading and Narrow Reading

In Jobbitt (2023), I attempted to clarify the differences between ER, NR, and Intensive Reading (IR), as well as raise awareness of ER research processes for my graduate school teacher-trainees. It is important to note that NR is a subset of extensive reading “because it involves reading a large number of texts” (Chang & Renandya, 2021); it is a fact that the texts being read may be few in scope, but not necessarily in number. Therefore, it can be helpful to review extensive reading principles as put forth by Day and Bamford (2002). In sum, the principles are:

1. The reading material is easy. [beginners, use *rule of hand*; intermediate, 1-2 words/page]
2. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available. [enticement]
3. Learners choose what they want to read. [freedom of choice]
4. Learners read as much as possible. [amount of time is key / one book/week]
5. The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information, and general understanding.
6. Reading is its own reward. [reading is the central experience]
7. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower. [students read at their own pace]
8. Reading is individual and silent. [discovery process]
9. Teachers orient and guide their students. [explain the process, guide, and introduce materials]
10. The teacher is a role model of a reader. [teachers influence their students]

Day and Bamford (2002) hope that these “ten principles will give teachers food for thought and reflection as they consider their beliefs about how best to help their students become proficient foreign-language readers” (p. 140). Applying these principles in a classroom, whether with shorter activity-based tasks or in an ERP, can develop, test, and refine such teacher beliefs.

The exposure of extensive reading principles through an ERP like LCs is meant to have students actually experience the principles in action over the course of a school semester or year. Meeting the ideal of these principles is always the goal, but there are always challenges with the number of books offered, different authored texts, variety of texts and genres available, plus student preferences, etc. Teachers often do the best that is possible given the teaching context. In the case of NR, nearly all of the ER principles are applied similarly, while only a few principles are modified. For example, principle number two (variety of text type) and principle number three (choice) may be more limited, obviously, but there is still a range of texts and topic available within the NR scope.

Benefits of a Narrow Reading Program

The benefits of using narrow reading in an ERP are plentiful and proven. As noted, Kang (2015) showed the reading TBNR texts “can help learners understand meaning of words and become aware of the appropriate use of words,” and that such “findings suggest that when learners read supplementary texts that are thematically linked, their productive as well as receptive vocabulary knowledge is enhanced” (p. 177). Another benefit may be individual student success. Hansen and Collins’ (2015) collective report from various researchers stated that first, students engaged in ER may have higher reading scores provided they have access to books and are enrolled in a reading management program (RMP). Earlier research by Horst (2005) noted that ERP participation generally lead to “improved performance on tests of reading comprehension, writing, and other integrative measures” (p. 358). Also, Hansen and Collins (2015) further summarily note that the findings of additional studies “suggest that narrow text collections can provide readers with multiple exposures to words which may facilitate incidental vocabulary acquisition” (p. 139).

A more recent study using graded readers with the aim of investigating the effect of narrow reading on EFL learners’ vocabulary learning by Chang and Renandya (2021) found that learners, “acquired significantly more vocabulary from texts written by the same author and random texts than from texts of the same title,” as well as remembered more greatly the target-word sources encountered, among other results. Student perceptions of vocabulary usage may be affected by doing narrow reading, also. Chang and Millet’s (2017) study exploring “the reading fluency and perceptions of two groups of EFL students” had varied results. Their study showed that same-titled graded readers written at different levels but with the same scenario led to increased perceptions of comprehension and noticing of recurring vocabulary words in the texts, but required different background knowledge activation, with both groups showing “that they read faster with related texts than with unrelated ones (p.15).

Several studies using NR and graded readers from several studies reveal similar results on vocabulary learning. In a study on Korean EFL middle-school students to examine the effects of repeated reading (RR) and theme-based narrow reading (TBNR) on vocabulary learning and reading comprehension, Kim (2015) found

that TBNR “was significantly more effective than RR in enhancing learners’ vocabulary knowledge as well as reading comprehension” (p. ii). Kang’s (2015) study of 61 high-intermediate learners reported that NR greatly “facilitated learners’ understanding of meaning of target words and their ability to appropriately use them” (p. 165). A study with Taiwanese EFL college students by Chang and Renandya (2021) showed that texts by the same author or random texts led to more vocabulary words being acquired than from texts of the same title. Lastly, while not a study on the effects of graded readers and vocabulary, a more profile-raising article by Renandya, et al (2018) on series reading offers serious food for thought on why series reading should be strongly considered in ERPs.

It may be that motivation can be affected as well. Chang (2019) mentions several positive advantages of narrow reading for L2 learners. Chang (2019) notes that: topical familiarity aids in comprehension because it enhances background knowledge, and also that the “research on frequency of word occurrence and distribution has demonstrated that learners need multiple exposures to acquire a word;” further, “from an input-processing perspective, the possession of better background knowledge of a topic may afford learners more attentional resources for processing other elements such as unknown words or phrases” (p. 770). All of these reasons may help amplify lexical growth for L2 learners and contribute to the idea that narrow reading does benefits students’ vocabulary acquisition.

Implementing Narrow Reading

Recent research offers ideas on how best to implement narrow reading in L2 contexts. If one has familiarity with extensive reading programs like literature circles, then narrow reading may be looked at as simply an extension of ER principles with a more limited scope using a narrower range of graded readers. To review, NR restricts the amount of reading material to reading “several books from only one genre, about one subject, or from one author” (Bryan, 2011, p. 117; Hansen & Collins, 2015).

Highlighting several different steps or ideas based on narrow reading research can help teachers implement narrow reading. First, use graded readers. It is commonly acknowledged that reading a lot of material at a level that a student can successfully understand is of benefit to the student. This can lead to greater gains in both vocabulary and background knowledge, and also, graded readers are plentiful. Second, choose books from the same author. Authors have their own style, and style can make stories more interesting. Third, choose books from the same genre. Repeated exposure to same-genre texts can make for a smoother reading process (Chang & Millet, 2017). For example, Kang (2015) noted that “repeated encounters with the thematic concept appeared to help learners develop semantic networks,” and that, “frequent encounters of target words in recurring contexts helped their learning” as well as recognition of word meanings (p. 175).

In addition to these ideas, Chang and Renandya (2021) note several factors as to why they believe that their study on vocabulary acquisition led to successful gains: the texts had interesting stories;

the texts had simple story scenarios, and the texts matched students' language levels. If a teacher is unsure about which texts may be interesting to students, perhaps a visual survey of books available, or a literal survey on books that students have read would be more than appropriate; a survey on the author, text type (horror, crime, etc.), page-length, and the number of texts that they would like to read might also help in this regard.

Implications and Challenges for the Teaching of Narrow Reading

The implications for the teaching of narrow reading are varied, but some implications seem to be a constant. In their 1997 article, Bamford and Day commented that "No matter how sophisticated the teaching profession's understanding of and ability to teach the reading process, until students read in quantity, they will not become fluent readers" (p. 7). Hansen and Collins (2015) found that "ELL children did not engage in as much independent reading (in terms of exposure to words) as native English-speaking children" and suggest both in-school and out-of-school reading processes to boost exposure. Quantity is key, even with narrow reading. In this author's experience with extensive reading programs, this lament still seems to ring true – it is almost always a challenge to get students to read and to keep reading.

Some implications may be more immediate or practical. In a study of ELL children, Hansen and Collins (2015) note that all children may need help in selecting the correct level of book for reading as well as appropriate access to books. On the material side, Kang (2015) notes that one challenge "lies in how to prepare materials for narrow reading" (p. 177) and references Schmitt and Carter's (2000) observation about the plethora of online materials available to teachers. Hanuvong (2020) offers familiar ideas (same author, same theme, same genre, same topic or series book) for authentic newspaper passages or a book series application. It is very obvious that there is an ever-growing amount of language learning material available online with even more growth expected, according to Conti (2017).

In regard to teaching beginning readers to develop L2 fluency with narrow reading, Chang and Millet (2017) suggest that by choosing texts that are related to each other, L2 learners will begin to read faster; also, narrow reading "enables students to move faster from a lower level to a higher level" (p. 16). A helpful verbatim summary of some reasons why teachers may want to introduce series reading early on in a school reading program is offered by Renandya, et al (2018):

1. Series books are highly motivating
2. Series reading is a great source of narrow input. (Krashen, 2004b)
3. Reading serialized fiction can greatly reduce the problems encountered by novice and struggling readers.
4. The effect of reading is most pronounced after students have read a large number of books over a period of time. (Renandya, et al, 1999)

5. Students often report a first positive experience with a book, which may then stimulate their interest in reading. (Trelease, 2001)
6. Reading book series can improve students' reading proficiency as well as their vocabulary, grammar, and knowledge of structure (Krashen 2004).
7. The Conduit Hypothesis (Krashen, 2018) posits that the path to developing competence in academic language involves three interrelated stages, with each stage serving as a conduit to the next stage. (all authors above cited in Renandya, et al (2018).

These reasons are persuasive, but this author would also argue that even if such a program were not implemented early-on in a public-school setting, for example, that they could be arguably implemented at a middle-school level. To be fair, local test-taking requirements (SAT, etc.) may be in impediment to such implementation.

Limitations and Future Research

No individual study is perfect and without limitations, and a range of challenges still exist when it comes to implementing narrow reading in L2 classroom contexts. One challenge may be a matter of time and perspective, as in Kang (2015), where the author notes that: 1) "the study was not designed to evaluate the long-term effects of narrow reading, so it is not possible to determine whether the observed positive effects of NR will be maintained." This author's observation is that this is not an unusual challenge in that students are in school for a limited number of months, depending on the context, and have many breaks. Chang and Pang (2020), in a study of three major publishers' graded readers, are more readily available in Taiwan suggest that teachers raise their awareness of which texts are "more accessible for students, and what genres and authors are more popular with their students" (p. 217). The lack of a significant number of texts written by the same author within the same genre can be a great impediment to implementing an extensive reading program like narrow reading.

Conclusion

If we consider taking a step backward to see the forest from the trees, one observation about extensive reading is that a greater variety of texts, i.e., the forest, may be less attractive to students than a small copse of trees; i.e., the narrow reading approach may pique students' interest more so. A constant challenge for teachers is offering a variety of easy yet interesting texts for the students to consume; the challenge for students – especially undergraduate and graduate students – is finding the time to read consistently on a daily basis in addition to meeting academic obligations, walking down the forest path, so to say. The research on narrow reading shows that there are strong benefits, particularly at the lexical level to using it if teachers can find appropriate materials and implement them successfully in L2 contexts.

Another way to view this would be to consider the best tool for the job, meaning that depending on the L2 context, applying the best ER or NR reading approach or technique that meets the student's

needs and abilities. 'Less is more' may be one approach, which could be, in this author's view, likened to Schmitt and Carter's (2000) positive assertion that NR can help L2 learners facilitate the transition to more authentic texts as they state, "by lowering the lexical load required of the learner" (p. 8). It is therefore perhaps prudent to think about how best to meet students' needs and expectations when engaging with extensive reading, winnowing ER to a manageable workload. Narrow reading may just be one smarter solution.

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