
The Lexical Advantages of Narrow Reading for Second Language Learners

Norbert Schmitt and Ronald Carter

Vocabulary Learning and Narrow Reading

There is a consensus that the incidental vocabulary learning stemming from reading is an essential complement to the explicit teaching of vocabulary (e.g., Coady & Huckin, 1997; Schmitt & McCarthy, 1997). A major reason for this consensus is that the number of words necessary for effective language use is greater than that which can be taught easily (although see Meara, 1995, 1998, for a rebuttal to the limitations of vocabulary teaching). Estimates for the number of words required vary from about 2,000 for everyday oral ability (Schonell, Meddleton, & Shaw, 1956) to 10,000 or more for reading academic texts (Hazenberg & Hulstijn, 1996). Another reason is that a reader must know a very high percentage of words in any text in order to either obtain the gist of the passage or to guess the meaning of any unknown words. The exact percentage depends on factors such as background knowledge of the text topic and purpose of reading, but figures of 95% or higher are normally suggested. These high percentage figures translate into the necessity of knowing approximately 5,000 words to begin to read authentic texts (Hirsh & Nation, 1992).

Language instructors would have trouble teaching this number of words in any explicit way. In all likelihood, they will be able to teach only a small percentage of these words in class, so the rest need to be met and learned in exposure activities outside the

In sum, the case for reading as an aid to vocabulary learning seems to be strong, both in terms of providing the repetition necessary to establish new words in the learner's mind and in supplying the different contexts necessary to elaborate and expand the richness of knowledge about those words. The question remains, however, of how best to encourage and organize such reading.

classroom. Krashen (1989) has long argued for the power of incidental learning from exposure, with reading a particularly good source. In general, research has supported this position, showing that although the probability of learning new words from any single meeting in context is low (somewhere between 5% and 14%, depending on various factors), the cumulative effect of multiple exposures from sustained reading is considerable. (See Nagy, 1997, for an overview of the role of incidental learning and context in vocabulary learning.)

Thus, due to the incremental nature of vocabulary acquisition, repeated exposures are necessary to consolidate a new word in the learner's mind. Moreover, there is another essential advantage to meeting a word repeatedly through reading. Knowing a word well enough to use it competently involves more than just an awareness of a single meaning sense; it also includes knowledge of lexical aspects such as its grammatical behavior, collocations, register constraints, and even alternative meaning senses (Nation, 1990). It would be impossible to gain mastery over all of these from the information available in a single context (or even a limited number of contexts). Rather, learners need to meet words in a wide variety of contexts in order to gain an appreciation of the true range of a word's usage.

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Newspapers or magazines in the target language have often been suggested as a good source for learner reading. It is assumed that such authentic materials will be interesting for students because they cover real world events, some of which should affect the students' lives and touch them personally. In addition, they are generally readily available in most parts of the world, at least if English is the target language. Sternfeld (1989) lists several other desirable traits: (a) students are already familiar with the style and organizational structure of newspaper stories; (b) newspapers often provide extralingual cues to meaning, e.g., photographs and tables; (c) second language (L2) newspapers are likely to report news similar to that reported in first language (L1) newspapers, which learners may have already read, allowing learners to approach the L2 reading with a considerable amount of background knowledge; and (d) the variety of topics covered in newspapers allows a progression from more concrete, action-oriented stories to more abstract, issue-oriented news.

However, a potential problem with L2 newspapers and magazines is that learners may not initially have the prerequisite vocabulary necessary to read them. One way to ease learners into authentic texts like these is to use *narrow reading* (Krashen, 1981). Narrow reading is reading on the same topic over the course of a number of texts. One advantage of narrow reading is that readers become familiar with the topic and have much better background knowledge for future passages on that topic. Another advantage has to do with the mechanics of vocabulary distribution. Key words in topic-related passages tend to recur, easing the lexical burden on readers as they become familiar with this vocabulary (Hwang & Nation, 1989). From a reading perspective, focusing on texts on a recurrent topic should give learners the chance to practice reading more quickly and fluently. From a vocabulary perspective, multiple exposures to recurrent words should facilitate vocabulary learning.

This article approaches narrow reading from three perspectives. The first perspective employs a corpus analysis of two sets of newspaper readings to demonstrate how narrow reading lowers the vocabulary load of texts. The second is learner-focused, reporting students' perceptions of narrow reading for facilitating their reading and vocabulary

learning. The third is pedagogical, with practical suggestions being offered of how teachers can install a narrow reading component into their language classes.

Using Corpus Analysis to Explore the Benefits of Narrow Reading

This section focuses on the vocabulary in two different sets of newspaper stories: one, a series of reports on a running story, and the other, a collection of unrelated stories. By comparing these two sets, we hope to illustrate how the vocabulary load is lessened in related stories and, thus, demonstrate why narrow reading can indeed be a useful pedagogical approach for emerging readers. To do this, we had to find a news report that continued over a number of days. The tragic death of Princess Diana provided such a story, with daily front-page lead stories in most newspapers around the world. We collected the newspaper reports relating to Princess Diana's death and funeral every day for a week from a regional U.S. newspaper in southern Idaho. We compared these to other front-page stories from the same newspaper during the same period of time. The two types of stories are summarized in the chart below.

Reports in the Diana category follow the same developing story, whereas stories in the

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Other category cover a wide variety of topics, ranging from politics to finance to armed conflict. Both categories include nine news stories, totaling 7,843 words. (The Cassini story was trimmed slightly so that the stories in the Other category would have exactly the same number of words as those in the Diana category.) The stories in both categories were then analyzed to discover the differences in vocabulary.

Summary of Two Sets of Newspaper Stories

Day	Diana stories	Other stories
Sunday	Diana dies	Salt Lake Olympics
Monday	Body returned; mourning	Trade unions in Idaho
Tuesday	Driver was drunk; mourning	President Yeltsin
Wednesday	Paparazzi as suspects	Dow Jones record day
Thursday	Royal family panned for mourning style	Ski area development
Friday	No story	NATO-Serb clash
Saturday	Queen's speech	Parking at state fair
Sunday	Funeral	Tobacco deal in danger; Cassini spacecraft security worries

Most Frequent Content Words

Occurrences			Occurrences		
8.	said	100	7.	said	93
10.	Diana	79	21.	pay	33
15.	princess	53	22.	school	32
30.	car	32	29.	work	29
31.	Diana's	32	30.	union	28
33.	photographers	31	44.	people	21
35.	Fayed	30	45.	right	21
38.	people	29	48.	one	20
41.	death	26	49.	year	20
43.	palace	25	Total		297
45.	royal	24			
47.	crash	23			
48.	police	23			
50.	time	20			
	Total	527			

The Most Frequent Words

First, let us examine the most frequent words in the Diana and Other newspaper stories. We find that the most frequent words are *function words* (also known as *grammatical words*, e.g., articles, prepositions, pronouns). This result is the standard finding for most texts, for the simple reason that function words are needed to form syntactically-correct sentences, regardless of the topic. At the top of both frequency lists are the words *the, to, and, a, of, in, for, and it*. Thus, narrow reading relies on knowledge of these function words just as broad reading does.

However, the essence of a text comes through in *content words* (the words that carry meaning). It is with these words that we begin to see the difference between the two sets of texts. The chart above shows the content words occurring in the top 50 most frequent words in the Diana and Other stories (all missing words are function words).

Not only are there a greater number of different high-frequency content words in the Diana texts, but the total number of their occurrences is far greater as well (77% greater). These figures illustrate the advantage of narrow reading when it comes to vocabulary recurrence at the highest end of the word frequency scale. Moreover, this is not only a high-frequency phenomenon; the Diana texts retain some advantage in this

respect, even with words at lower frequency levels.

Total Number of Different Types of Words

A second way to analyze these story sets is to find the number of different word types in each. Both sets of stories contained the same number of words (sometimes called *tokens*) but different individual words (*types*). (For example, in the sentence *The big cat drank milk from the big dish*, there are

nine tokens but only seven types: *the, big, cat, drank, milk, from, and dish*). The argument for narrow reading would benefit if there were fewer types, as we find to be the case when comparing the two sets of stories: the Other news stories contained 2,224 types, whereas the Diana stories contained only 2,068. Thus, the variety of stories in the Other category contained about 7.5% more types than did the stories on a common topic. Therefore, not only do content words recur more frequently in topic-related texts, but there are also fewer word types to be dealt with. Taken together, these features can do much to reduce the vocabulary load on the developing reader.

Proper Nouns

One category of lower frequency words that occurs in newspaper articles is proper nouns. In fact, about 10% of the words in newspapers are proper nouns, most of them names of people or places (Hwang & Nation, 1989). If a story refers to people or places well known to the reader, then this facilitates the reading process. However, stories often involve subjects that are totally unfamiliar. For example, Other stories contain proper nouns such as Tom Welch (a former Olympic official), Cassini (a man-made satellite), and Targhee (a national forest). Hwang and Nation (1989) suggest that such unknown

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names are explained in context in the news stories, but some of these explanations may be challenging for L2 readers to grasp. For instance, in the newspaper extract "Frank Joklik is approaching his new job as chief executive in charge of the 2002 Winter Olympics much as he oversaw \$2 billion worth of projects while at the helm of mining giant Kennecott Corp." (Moulton, 1997, p. A1), the information about being chief executive of the Olympics is not set off in a separate clause that enables readers to easily associate the name Joklik with this definition.

Of course, once a name is familiar, later repetitions of it should pose fewer problems. Generally speaking, however, the more repetitions of proper nouns, the easier the vocabulary load for readers.

Let us again compare the Diana and Other stories to illustrate how topic-related stories contain more repetitions of proper nouns. If we count each token in a proper noun as an individual type (e.g., Princess Diana = two types), then we find that the Other stories contain 736 tokens and 344 types, whereas the Diana stories contain 828 tokens and 262 types. Since both story sets contain 7,843

tokens, these results support Hwang and Nation's (1989) estimate of about 10% proper nouns in newspaper stories. The topic-related stories contain 12.5% more repetitions of proper nouns as well as 31% fewer different proper noun types. If we choose to count each proper noun as a separate type (e.g., Princess Diana = one type), there is a similar trend of more tokens and fewer types in the ongoing stories.

When we look at the individual proper nouns, we find that the less frequent ones seem to be repeated at about the same rate for both sets. However, the difference between the two sets is very pronounced for the most frequent proper nouns (see the chart below).

We again find the beneficial pattern of more overall repetition of vocabulary, with a greater number of word types being very frequent. In fact, over 41% of the proper nouns recur eight or more times in the Diana stories, whereas less than 16% recur in the Other stories.

It is important to note that the content words and the proper nouns that frequently recur in the ongoing texts may or may not be particularly useful for other texts. For exam-

ple, it is unlikely that learners would meet the proper noun Langevin again in a text, whereas the most frequent content words in the Diana stories would probably prove quite useful in future reading. The important point is not how valuable these words are in other texts or language use, but that the recurrence of these words makes the ongoing stories more accessible to read. The language benefits come from being able to read and manipulate these texts. Any additional vocabulary learning should be seen as a beneficial supplement rather than a negative one because some of the words are not immediately useful.

Learners' Reactions to Narrow Reading

The previous section has illustrated how narrow reading can help emerging readers. However, we know that introducing new language strategies can often be ineffective if learners do not see their value. With narrow reading, this danger should be minimal because it is something learners already do in their native language. Following a continuing story in a newspaper or reading magazines on

Most Frequent Proper Nouns (8+ occurrences)

Name	Occurrences	% of Proper Nouns	Name	Occurrences	% of Proper Nouns
Diana	58	10.49	Joklik	17	3.45
Diana's	29	5.24	NATO	14	2.85
Princess Diana	20	3.62	Yeltsin	13	2.64
Paris	19	3.44	Cassini	12	2.44
London	15	2.71	US	12	2.44
Langevin	12	2.17	August	9	1.83
Sunday	12	2.17	Total	77	15.65
Buckingham Palace	10	1.81			
Fayed	10	1.81			
Princess of Wales	10	1.81			
Mercedes	9	1.63			
St. James Palace	8	1.45			
Britain	8	1.45			
Prince Charles	8	1.45			
Total	228	41.25			

a particular topic of interest are examples of narrow reading that many learners are likely to be familiar with. If this is pointed out to them, there should be little student resistance to transferring a reading behavior already in place in the L1 to an L2 learning situation. In fact, learners may already have intuitions of how narrow reading can make reading and vocabulary learning easier, and a classroom discussion on the subject can bring these ideas out into the open.

To illustrate some actual learner attitudes toward narrow reading, we looked at how one group of four emerging readers responded to the narrow reading activities they participated in as part of their regular reading class. This class was part of an intensive preuniversity course and was aimed at developing the reading and vocabulary skills of low intermediate-level students. The students read one report on a continuing story (e.g., the earthquake in Taiwan) over a period of several days, in addition to reading stories of their own choosing. At the end of this period, they filled out an informal questionnaire, which asked them to consider their ease of reading and vocabulary learning when dealing with related and unrelated newspaper stories. In the questionnaire, all of the students responded favorably to the narrow reading task. One student wrote, "I like reading one story because after the first day, I don't have to use the dictionary as much, so it makes reading more enjoyable." Another responded, "You can learn more information about the topic if you read about it over several days." As both comments illustrate, students were able to see clear value in this approach to reading and vocabulary study. Only one student made the criticism that, despite the value of narrow reading, she preferred to choose her own topic rather than have the teacher pick it.

Incorporating Narrow Reading Into the Syllabus

There is considerable advice available about how to encourage learners to read more in general (e.g., Day & Bamford, 1998). However, there are several things teachers can do to promote narrow reading in particular. Below are a number of suggestions:

- Collect stories on a given topic in a newspaper for students to read. This should not be difficult, as Hwang and Nation (1989) report that 19% of stories in international, domestic, and sports sections of the newspapers they studied were on a recurring topic.
- Because students will be reading a number of reports on a continuing story, it is important to choose one that retains their

interest. This implies that polling student preferences is an important preliminary step in choosing an appropriate story.

- Teachers can give students narrow readings even when focusing on other language aspects. For example, teachers could assign readings on the same story, but from different types of newspapers

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(e.g., a national newspaper, such as the *New York Times*, versus a local newspaper, or a respected newspaper versus a more sensational tabloid). This would still involve narrow reading, but the focus in the classroom exercises could be on something else, for example, the different kinds of language used in the different newspapers, or the way language is connected to point of view (see Carter, Goddard, Reah, Sanger, & Bowring, 1997).

- Have students bring in magazines on topics they like and read several articles from these magazines.
- Have students read books. Following a storyline within a single book should yield much the same facilitation as reading several separate articles on the same news story. (See Dupuy, Tse, & Cook, 1996, for more on bringing books into the classroom.)
- If students are not yet at the point where they can attempt authentic, adult-level texts, then simplified readers can provide useful reading input as an interim step. Beyond this, learners can be encouraged to read authentic materials written at a primary- or secondary-school level. Cho and Krashen (1994) found that a series of novels designed for junior high and high school girls became compelling reading for their four adult subjects, who ended up reading more than two of the books per week. From this experience, they suggest that reading in a single genre (such as a series with recurring characters and situations) is valuable in promoting

literacy development.

- Narrow reading does not have to imply solely paper-based texts. The Internet provides a vast amount of authentic text available on almost any topic imaginable, a majority of it in English. (See Li & Hart, 1996, for more on the World Wide Web.)
- By having students read texts from a single author, teachers can also limit, to some degree, the vocabulary and structures that will be encountered, as authors often draw from the same vocabulary pool and use a similar writing style in their different writings.
- If teaching using a content-based approach, staying with a particular topic area for a sustained period of time should produce the same recurring exposure as narrow reading, presumably with the same benefits. This is especially true if learners are reading in the content area a part of the course.
- Any kind of reading can only succeed if the learner knows enough vocabulary to comprehend a majority of the text and guess the meanings of new words from context. This fact may well necessitate an explicit focus on vocabulary in order to bring learners up to the point where comprehension and inferencing are possible.

Conclusion

Reading should be a key component in most language learning programs. Simplified readers are useful for beginning students, but eventually, learners will want to start accessing authentic texts. Narrow reading can facilitate the transition to these texts, and perhaps permit earlier access to them, by lowering the lexical load required of the learner.

Our small survey suggests that learners can be quick to realize the benefits of narrow reading and are willing to have it become part of their coursework. We hope that this article has succeeded in illustrating the advantages of narrow reading and has provided some concrete ideas about how to incorporate it into the classroom.

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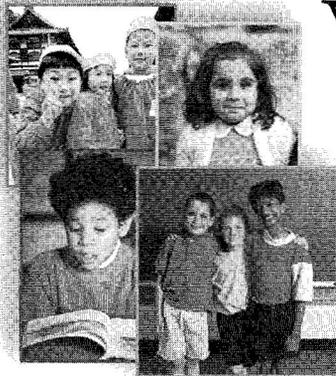
Authors

Norbert Schmitt lectures on vocabulary studies, language testing, and TESOL methodology at the University of Nottingham, in the United Kingdom. He recently published *Vocabulary in Language Teaching with Cambridge University Press* (2000).

Ronald Carter is professor of modern English language at the University of Nottingham, in the United Kingdom. He has published widely in the fields of literary, educational, and applied linguistics.



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