

Narrow Reading and English Vocabulary Improvement

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Abstract

Vocabulary has played an important role in recent EFL studies, because it is an important factor in second language learning. Without vocabulary, communication is undoubtedly impossible. This study sought to investigate the impact of narrow reading on vocabulary intake. In this study, the effect of this kind of reading input was investigated in two levels: topic- limited lexical development and author- limited lexical development. Seventy five intermediate students were divided into three groups of equal number of students. Two classes were selected randomly as the experimental group. A pre- test was conducted on the first category of vocabulary. After a week, the treatment for the experimental group started. A week after the end of the treatment, a post-test was given to all three classes. The results showed that author- limited narrow reading was more helpful than topic-limited narrow reading and non- narrow reading. A one-way ANOVA and post hoc comparisons showed a great difference among the groups. The comparisons showed that those using author-limited narrow reading developed their knowledge of vocabulary more than the participants of the control group.

Keywords: Lexical item, Narrow reading, Lexical knowledge, Input, Narrow input

INTRODUCTION

The concept of language learning has been always the subject of study and research. These studies had certain contribution to the field. As Laufer (1997) states, vocabulary is the center of language learning and use. People are not able to convey meaning and communicate in a particular language without an appropriate repertoire of vocabulary.

One way to develop the knowledge of words in EFL learners is reading. Reading is a receptive skill. It seems that the knowledge of vocabulary can be developed and boosted by using receptive skills (using listening and reading), rather than by using productive skills (by practicing speaking and writing). It is clear that after acquiring the receptive skills, vocabulary may be transferred to other areas, like the productive area. The receptive and productive mastery of vocabulary are the two ends of the same continuum (Gass & Selinker, 2001). Krashen (1985) first introduced narrow reading in

order to achieve this aim. Narrow reading is a sort of reading which is limited to a single topic or the vocabulary used by a single writer. He (1996) said that narrow reading (narrow input) is more fruitful for second language acquisition. So, comprehending the text after reading the first few pages is easier for the students who read on a single subject, or read the works of a single author (Yang, 2001). The student who reads using focused or narrow reading faces various contexts and sees frequent words related to that topic (Cho & Krashen, 1994; Krashen, 1981; Schmitt & Carter, 2000).

In non- narrow reading – unlike narrow reading – a lot of different topics and writers are introduced to the students. The input given to students is so broad and it is not that efficient. The narrow reading exposes the student to new words repeatedly. So, it helps the development of vocabulary in many ways: first, every writer has some special choice of words and his own discourse. Narrow reading is also very motivating. A subject in which the student is interested encourages him/her to read in order to find the meaning. It is not like an exercise of decoding the passage (Devine & Eskey, 1988). Unlike narrow reading, non- narrow reading provides the student with new words and unfamiliar styles in a context- limited way.

There are no easy or quick solutions for optimizing reading achievement to develop the students' vocabulary in L2. This thesis was trying to find the problematic area in order to help Iranian EFL students to develop their knowledge of vocabulary and solve many of their problems in reading and vocabulary. The purpose of this thesis was to find out if narrow reading (which is a sort of narrow input that has two levels of topic- limited and author- limited) enhance their L2 knowledge and storage of vocabulary.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

RQ1: Does topic- limited narrow reading have a significant influence on the development of vocabulary in intermediate EFL students?

RQ 2: Does author- limited narrow reading have a significant influence on the development of vocabulary in intermediate EFL students?

RQ 3: Does non- narrow reading have a significant influence on the development of vocabulary in intermediate EFL students?

Based on these research questions, the following null- hypotheses are generated:

H0 1: The topic- limited narrow reading does not have a significant influence on the development of vocabulary in intermediate EFL students.

H0 2: The author- limited narrow reading does not have a significant influence on the development of vocabulary in intermediate EFL students.

H03: The non- narrow reading does not have a significant influence on the development of vocabulary in intermediate EFL students.

THE STUDY

The design of this study was quasi-experimental. There were two experimental and one control group in this research. The independent variables were narrow reading and

non-narrow reading and the dependent variable was the amount of the students' knowledge of vocabulary.

METHOD

75 male students who were between twenty to thirty years old were identified intermediate by Oxford placement test. They were then, put randomly in 3 classes of twenty five students. Two classes were experimental groups and one class was the control group.

Four instruments were used in this study. The instruments included Oxford placement test, the first and the second 1000- words test (the first one is used as the pre- test and the second one was used as a post – test), the treatment (the instructions which are topic-limited and author- limited narrow reading) and the on- line vocabulary profiler software.

Two equivalent tests of 1000 high frequency words is designed by Nation (1990), considering the content and the number of words. Each test had 40 items. This number was enough to reach the desired conclusions. The format of the test considers three types of answers for each item: "true", "false" and "do not understand". The content of the test was not problematic for learners because it was tried to use most frequent word in the definitions. Furthermore, the sentences containing the words which were going to be tested were controlled considering their grammatical complexity. Just content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs) were tested.

Sometimes some photos were used in order to avoid less frequent content words. For instance, a photo of a dog was put in front of the definition "This does not let people approach your house". In comparison to the word "keep", the word "dog" is less frequent. So, in the mentioned sentence, a photo of a dog was put instead of the word "dog". Moreover, since most frequent words had a lot of meanings, it was tried to test the highly frequent meanings of the words.

Procedure

First, the recently registered students were given OPT in order to discover their level of proficiency in English. This was done because of the registration requirements of Jahad Daneshgahi Language center. Based on the test results, they were put in nine groups which are from pre- elementary to upper- advanced levels. After that, based on the goal of the research, three intermediate classes were chosen. The participants were all men aged from twenty to thirty. The classes were held 1.5 hours each day, six days per week, and ten weeks in a semester.

In the OPT, the vocabulary size is not tested separately. So, Nation's (1990) Vocabulary Level test A was taken by the participants. They had sixty minutes to take the test. The findings showed that the learners were not proficient at the first 1000- vocabulary level. The students' scores were below 83 percent. According to Nation, those whose score is in this range should be instructed the same word list. The method of instruction is

narrow reading. Then, because there were three study groups in design of the study, the two experimental groups were chosen randomly by toss- up technique.

A week after the pre-test, the treatment started. The reason of a week interval between the pre-test and the treatment was to avoid the possibility of learning words which have been seen in the pre-test, instead of learning them in the treatment, because the frequency of the words used in the test and that of the treatment were the same.

The students of all three groups participated in the dialogic course of the language center each session. After the pre-test, on odd days they read their suitable treatment texts instead of reading classroom texts. The two experimental groups, EG1 and EG2, were given suitable treatments which were author- limited narrow reading (ALNR) and topic - limited narrow reading (TLNR). By flipping a coin, the treatments of each group was chosen randomly. The students were not allowed to ask questions for clarifying the words during reading. The reason was that the test was assessing acquisition from reading. Asking questions might affect the vocabulary comprehension. So, the students were asked to try to realize the meaning of the words as they can. The teacher read the text one time. Then, the participants themselves had to read the text again in fifteen minutes. They had the chance and time to read the text again three times. At the end, the texts were taken back from the students. The reason was to avoid the consequences of students' rereading the text after the end of the class.

A week after the treatment, the post-test, which was equivalent English 1000 - vocabulary test was given to the experimental and to the control groups. The post - test was given in order to see if the vocabulary sizes had been affected (table 4). Post-test scores of each group were analyzed by the analysis of variance, between group mean scores of the post-test to find out whether there was a significant difference among the groups.

RESULTS

The pre-test scores of all groups were analyzed by the analysis of variance (ANOVA) to make sure there is no significant difference among the samples before the treatment for the experimental group. The results showed that there wasn't any significant difference among the groups before the treatment, because the observed F ratio was less than 1 (table 1).

Table 1. ANOVA among pretest means

Source of variance	S.S.	Df	MS	F	Sig.
Between group	8	2	4	0.49	$p > 0.05$
Within group	5321.65	72	8.32		

After the treatment, the scores gathered from the other equivalent English 1000- vocabulary tests were ranked and put beside the pretest scores for each student in each group. Next, using ANOVA (which makes it possible to compare many sample means at the same time), the differences which were most probably because of the influence of

the treatment, were examined. The F ratio is more than one and it is more than the critical F for the given degree of freedom. So, we conclude that there is a meaningful difference among the means (table 2).

Table 2. ANOVA among posttest means

Source of variance	S.S.	Df	MS	F	Sig.
Between group	498.32	2	312.21	41.54	$p < 0.05^*$
Within group	571.34	72	9.12		

Table 2 shows that we should find the intersection of 2/72 in F- distribution table. We found out a ratio between 3.11 and 3.33 at 0.01 level of probability and a ratio between 4.88 and 4.92 at 0.05 level of probability. The reason is that there is no place for $n = 72$ in the vertical column of the table. So, we should look at somewhere between 70 and 80. Table 2 shows that the F ratio was more than 1. So, we can be confident enough to conclude that there is a meaningful difference among the samples.

So, we used the Scheffe's post hoc test to find out where the difference lies. It is a conservative test. It is less probable that the claim of having significant difference in the comparisons be wrong. Table 4 shows that, the post hoc t- observed values of the first two comparisons (E EG1 vs. EG2 and EG1 & CG) are more than the critical value at 0.05 level of probability. So, we were able to claim that the author- limited narrow reading was efficient, because the sample who received author- limited narrow reading input was significantly different. But, the table shows that the difference in EG2 vs. CG comparison was not significant statistically. (Table 3)

Table 3. Scheffe' test for the effect of narrow reading

Comparison Groups	t observed values	Sig.
EG1 vs. EG2	8.12	$p < 0.05^*$
EG1 vs. CG	6.43	$p < 0.05^*$
EG2 vs. CG	0.32	$p > 0.05$
T critical value: 3.18		

DISCUSSION

Iranian English learners always had problems in comprehending a passage. It was mostly because of their very small vocabulary knowledge storage. The most current and general solution which worked out was using comprehensible input, especially contextualized comprehensible input. So, the two types of reading (author-limited and topic- limited) were chosen in this study. We want to find out which one is better in enhancing the lexical knowledge of Iranian students of English as a foreign language. The findings of this study showed that author- limited narrow reading was the most influential way to help the learners to expand their lexicon. This is a claim supported by a lot of scholars in the field of vocabulary. Decarrico (2001) recommend using narrow reading at two levels of author and topic limited for elementary or intermediate students of English as a foreign language. Also, comprehending a passage is easier for the learners who read narrowly. They can also develop their mental dictionary more

than the students who don't use narrow reading. Furthermore, Krashen (2004) claims that when the students read narrowly, they will be exposed a lot to a large amount of vocabulary and syntax. It expands the lexicon and the syntax and causes language autonomy. In this research, it is proved that the author limited narrow reading is more influential than the topic limited narrow reading and the non-narrow reading. Table 4 shows that the value of Scheffe's' test for the comparison between EG1 vs. EG2 and EG1 vs. CG was statistically significant. It means that EG1's performance was significantly different from the other two groups. But, the value of Scheffe's' test for the comparison between EG2 and CG was not significant at all. Based on the findings of this study, we reach to the conclusion that the author limited narrow reading is the most efficient reading input, because the participants in EG1 were able to expand their lexicon more than the participants of the other groups.

The results of this study are similar to the findings of other studies in this realm such as Lamme (1976), Cho & Krashen (1994, 1995), Cho, Ahn, Krashen (2005). These studies generally support this claim that narrow reading (without considering its type) makes the students interested in English grow quickly, so that they read more. These researches showed a would-be contaminating feature, which is "not being interested" in the interpretation of findings of this study. This study also supports the results of the research by Schmitt and Carter's (2000) which claim that narrow reading makes the readers fluent. Furthermore, it is emphasized that narrow input is better than non-narrow input in listening comprehension in the researches by Krashen and Rodrigs (1996); Dupuy (1999). Hui-Tzu Min (2008) was aware of the superiority of narrow reading. So, he did a research to find out if narrow reading is more important than reading plus vocabulary expanding tasks (RV) in EFL students' vocabulary enhancement. In this research, narrow reading was not better. One logical rationale for this is that in that study the focus was just on one kind of narrow reading (thematically relevant texts), not those written by the writer.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study showed that the learners who read author-limited narrow reading texts were able to expand their knowledge of lexicon more than the other two groups. Furthermore, considering the descriptive analysis of mean scores in pre-test and post-test, the other experimental group which was given the topic limited passages were able to expand their lexicon not as much as the experimental group, but more than the control group. It means that both author-limited and topic-limited narrow readings have been more influential than non-narrow reading. In other words, the learners can be exposed to both type of reading texts in order to increase their knowledge of words. In order to make the process of expansion faster, we should rely more on author-limited narrow reading texts. Considering the fact that in narrow reading texts, the words are repeated, the results of this study show that one single writer, instead of a single subject, gives the chance of more repetition.

One thing that makes this research interesting is that it compares two types of narrow reading texts – topic based, which is known by many people and author-based that a few teachers use for instruction at schools. Therefore, before this research many people might have wrongly thought that reading texts with the same theme is more effective. But, statistical analysis of data shows that author- limited narrow reading is not more influential than non-narrow reading and it is more useful than the topic- limited reading. Regarding this fact, we can reach the conclusion that giving students the passages which focus on one writer or a single subject will have more positive influences on the learner’s mental lexicon than various works and subjects.

According to the results of this research, much of the way for expanding the students’ mental dictionary is paved. So, these results are beneficial and useful for the material designers and teachers.

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