NARROW READING AND EFL LEARNERS' VOCABULARY LEARNING IN A THAI BUDDHIST UNIVERSITY[*]

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the effect of narrow reading on vocabulary learning in a Thai Buddhist university learning context. It also sought to explore the students' overall attitudes toward the narrow reading approach. This study's participants were 41 first-year undergraduate students of two intact classes, enrolled in a Thai Buddhist university. The participants were divided into the experimental group and the control group. The vocabulary knowledge scale test was given to all participants to measure their vocabulary improvement. A five-point Likert questionnaire was also used to explore participants' overall attitude toward the narrow reading approach. The data were analyzed using the vocabulary knowledge scale and questionnaire. The results indicated the benefits of narrow reading in enhancing Thai learners' vocabulary growth. Specifically, narrow reading enhanced learners' ability to recognize and recall the meaning of a word from multiple encounters and their ability to appropriately use it in context. The questionnaire results also showed Thai Buddhist university learners' high positive attitude toward narrow reading with an average of 4.59 (91.8%). Specifically, learners' interest, confidence and attitude toward narrow reading were remarkably increased after reading. Other implications of these findings are also discussed regarding current pedagogical practice and theory.

Keywords: narrow reading, vocabulary learning, vocabulary knowledge, attitude

Introduction

English reading instruction in Thailand still needs improvement. Thai students are familiar with textbook-based English learning; they are often assigned a passage to read or some vocabulary to look up before coming to class. The dominant form of reading

instruction for teachers is through direct-translation after discovering that no students search for the meaning of new words beforehand, illustrating the students' passive learning and the disappointment of English reading instruction. Sufficient vocabulary means that the reader could get the meaning in the reading passage. This clearly said that vocabulary is considered as the main center in understanding reading passages. Many Thai students are unskilled readers, and language instruction strategies in class are not implemented as often as they should be. Thus, the current study intends to reinforce the notion of narrow reading, a language instruction approach proposed by Stephen Krashen (1996). It is designed to be employed and integrated as a classroom instruction strategy to improve students' vocabulary learning. Reading is inextricably intertwined with vocabulary, and Richards and Renandya (2002) state that vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and provides much of the basis for how well learners speak, listen, read, and write. Although Thai students tend to read more English nowadays, they struggle to comprehend English texts due to various unknown vocabulary. Laufer and Sim determined that "the most pressing need of the foreign language learners was vocabulary, then subject matter knowledge.

Most language classes provide students with various themes or topics in reading materials, especially for beginning readers, assuming that different reading themes, genres, discourse, and authors' styles are useful for acquiring the language. However, this concept is subject to debate. A great number of reading inputs with interesting themes, genres, and styles from a single author are necessary for second language acquisition. New information in reading is challenging for poor readers with limited experience on the topic or theme. The term "the first few pages" (Yang, 2001) describes how immediate exposure to the first few pages in a foreign language is especially challenging for poor readers, who lose interest easily with the reading. Therefore, interesting reading with multiple stories sharing the same theme brings about more motivation for readers to engage in the reading activity and process language acquisition at the same time. This reading text method in a narrow focus is called narrow reading.

Narrow reading is based on the idea that many exposures drive second language acquisition in both structure and vocabulary to comprehensible inputs. It increases reading

motivation and engagement and furthers the acquisition of a second language in several other ways. First of all, it offers a built-in review of repeatedly covering a specific author's work with its distinctive styles and writing structures. In addition, focused reading in an area of interest for the reader activates the reader's background knowledge in a topic and is a great facilitator for comprehension. For instance, a reading by a well-known chef on cuisine is more successful than that of a lawyer or other unrelated areas of careers or those whose interests are not cooking.

Objective

This study aimed to further investigate the effect of narrow reading on Thai learners' vocabulary growth in a Buddhist learning context. To the best of our attempts, no research has been investigated in a Buddhist learning context. The current study also looked at Thai Buddhist university learners' overall attitude towards narrow reading. As such, two research questions were established to guide the study:

1. Does narrow reading facilitate Thai EFL learners' vocabulary learning in a Buddhist university context?

2. What is Thai EFL learners' overall attitudes toward the narrow reading approach?

Research methodology

Participants and setting

The present study consisted of 41 first-year EFL undergraduate students from a Buddhist university from the 2019 academic year. The participants aged between 19-21 years old, and all of them were enrolled in The History and Development of Buddhism (BU5001), a compulsory English course, offered by a Buddhist university curriculum. The participants included novices, monks, and lay students. The purposive sampling technique was used due to the limitation in the number of participants. One intact class was assigned to the experimental group (n =21), and the other was placed in the control group (n = 20). Both groups of participants were assumed to be homogenous because their characteristics, nature of learning and language proficiency were similar. Simultaneously, the control group did not receive any additional treatment on the narrow reading approach during the data collection. Instead, they received a regular English class following the university curriculum. Moreover,

both groups of participants were taught by the same English instructor. Regarding their language background, both groups of participants' English proficiency were relatively low according to their national examination scores in English and their grade point average.

Research Instruments

Vocabulary knowledge scale test

The Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS) test had been developed based on Paribakht and Wesche (1997) by the researcher to differentiate stages in participants' developing knowledge of 14 target words. The VKS test used a four-point scale combing self-report and performance items to elicit self-perceived and demonstrated knowledge of the target words in written sentences. The scale ratings ranged from totally unknown, through the recognition of word and some idea of its meaning, to the ability to use the word in speech and writing (see Figure 1). The participants were presented with a list of 14 target words and asked to indicate their knowledge level for each and self-report levels to demonstrate the word knowledge. The VKS test is intended to measure vocabulary knowledge's progression and development (Paribakht & Wesche, 1997).

The VKS was used in the current study for several reasons. First, VKS is considered suitable for measuring vocabulary gains during relatively short instructional periods (Paribakht and Wesche, 1997). Second, it is designed to measure both receptive and productive knowledge of a particular word (Wesche & Paribakht, 1994). Furthermore, VKS requires students to write the meaning of a target word and a sentence using the target word, which is considered a more accurate measurement of students' vocabulary acquisition.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was used to explore students' attitudes toward using the narrow reading approach to improve vocabulary knowledge (Research Question 2). The questionnaire consisted of 23 questions, divided into three parts. The first part consisted of the participants' personal information, and the second part comprised a checklist using a five-point Likert rating scale. The final section asked participants to share their recommendations regarding the narrow reading approach. The attitude questionnaire contents were constructed in Thai to ensure that the participants correctly understood

them. The questionnaire was based on the conceptual framework of the narrow reading approach. One open-ended item questionnaire was also added to better understand learners' attitude toward narrow reading.

Data collection procedures

Before the study, The VKS test was given to all participants in the first week of the first academic semester of 2019. Before the test, the instructions and examples of the VSK were provided to the participants in their native Thai language. The VSK was administered again to all participants after the final week of the experiment. The questionnaire was also distributed to all experimental group participants to explore their attitudes toward the narrow reading approach.

The meaning of the self-report category

VKS accepted self-reported word knowledge of categories A, B, C, and D and required a demonstration of knowledge of a word. Table 1 illustrates the meaning of the self-report categories.

Table 1 The meaning of the VKS scores (adapted from Paribakht & Wesche, 1997, p. 181)

Category	Meaning of category
A	The word is not familiar, and the non-word is given
B	The word is familiar, and the word with correct spelling is given
C	The word is used with semantic appropriateness in a sentence
D	The word is used with semantic appropriateness and grammatical accuracy in a sentence

Results

Results from the VSK test

The vocabulary knowledge test's self-rating scales were analyzed to determine the progress of vocabulary knowledge among Thai EFL university students through the narrow reading approach in Buddhist tertiary education. The study results showed that Thai Buddhist university participants had a specific tendency of self-report on vocabulary knowledge scale. Specifically, both groups of participants reported B the most, followed by

A, C and D, respectively, at T1. These findings showed that most participants had seen the target words before, but they were unsure of their meaning.

At T2, the largest number of experimental participants reported C (48%), followed by D (26.2%), B (22.4%) and A (3.4%). However, the control participants reported B (53.1%) the most. This followed by A (28.2%), C (8.8%) and D (2.7%), respectively. In this regard, the findings showed that after the treatment of narrow reading, most participants incrementally developed their knowledge of the targeted words. To illustrate, a larger number of experimental participants rated the target words C at T2, suggesting that they better understood the word when they had more meetings of the target word. However, they could now use it in context. Likewise, the control participants' vocabulary knowledge improved at T2, compared to that at T1. Still, their knowledge of the target words remained at B, indicating their partial knowledge of the target words. Overall, these findings suggest that the narrow reading approach enhances Thai Buddhist university participants' vocabulary knowledge in a Buddhist context. Table 2 illustrates a summary of the results of Thai Buddhist university participants' self-report on vocabulary learning through narrow reading.

Table 2 The results of Thai Buddhist university participants' self-report on vocabulary learning

Self-rated	A				B				C				D			
	G1		G2		G1		G2		G1		G2		G1		G2	
Words	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2
noble	7	0	6	4	14	1	11	12	0	10	3	2	0	10	0	2
auspicious	16	1	14	9	5	7	6	11	0	6	0	0	0	7	0	0
occasion	11	0	12	8	10	2	8	12	0	13	0	0	0	6	0	0
cling	11	0	7	6	10	4	12	14	0	13	1	0	0	4	0	0
wisdom	5	1	5	1	10	9	12	12	6	11	3	7	0	0	0	0
enlightenment	6	0	9	7	14	3	7	11	1	13	4	2	0	5	0	0
peaceful	8	0	8	7	11	3	11	10	2	10	0	2	1	8	1	1
mediate	10	0	10	5	11	5	8	5	0	10	2	0	0	6	0	0
attain	9	0	9	5	11	6	11	13	1	12	0	1	0	3	0	0
disciple	10	0	9	6	11	5	11	14	0	12	12	0	0	4	4	0
disappear	12	2	10	8	5	6	8	12	4	6	2	0	2	5	0	0

Self-rated	A				B				C				D			
Words	G1		G2		G1		G2		G1		G2		G1		G2	
	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2	T1	T2
deliver	7	1	6	8	9	5	8	11	1	8	0	3	3	8	2	2
offer	3	5	5	5	6	7	8	9	5	7	6	7	4	5	0	0
deva	7	0	5	4	6	3	6	10	5	10	4	2	5	6	6	3
Total (294)	122	10	115	83	133	66	127	156	25	141	37	26	15	77	13	8
Total (%)	41.5	3.4	39.1	28.2	45.2	22.4	43.2	53.1	8.5	48	12.6	8.8	5.1	26.2	4.4	2.7

Note: G1 = the experimental group (n=21); G2 = the control group (n=20)   T1 = pre-test; T2 = post-test

Participants were required to supply the word's meaning given rated it C. Participants were to generate a sentence using the target word if placed D to ensure that participants could use it in a meaningful context. Table 3 demonstrates the examples of participants' responses to vocabulary knowledge scale task. Based on Table 3, the results indicated that narrow reading group could produce more accurate and meaningful sentences. In contrast, the control group could provide the meaning of target words, but could barely generate the sentence using the target words. These findings suggest that narrow reading promote Thai participants' vocabulary acquisition, thus increasing language competence. The current results support previous studies that multiple word meetings can generate conditions for the development of vocabulary knowledge about a word's usage, including a word's grammatical behavior and syntactic class (Kang, 2015; Schmitt & Carter, 2000).

Table 3 Examples of Thai Buddhist university participants' written sentences of the target words

Target words	Group	Test	Examples of participants' written sentences
noble	Experimental	Pre-test	-
		Posttest	The Buddha came from the noble family.
	Control	Pre-test	รางวัล
		Posttest	เป็นไปไม่ได้
auspicious	Experimental	Pre-test	-
		Posttest	This auspicious time to be a monk.
	Control	Pre-test	รางวัล
		Posttest	-
wisdom	Experimental	Pre-test	-
		Posttest	The Buddha found the noble wisdom.
	Control	Pre-test	การสุ่ม

Target words	Group	Test	Examples of participants' written sentences
		Posttest	ความฉลาด
enlightenment	Experimental	Pre-test	-
		Posttest	The Buddha attained enlightenment.
	Control	Pre-test	ตรัสรู้
		Posttest	ตรัสรู้
peaceful	Experimental	Pre-test	สงบ
		Posttest	The forest is very peaceful.
	Control	Pre-test	สงบ
		Posttest	เพิ่มรูปแบบ
meditate	Experimental	Pretest	สงบ
		Posttest	I meditated for 2 hours yesterday.
	Control	Pre-test	-
		Posttest	-
disappear	Experimental	Pre-test	-
		Posttest	My sister disappeared from home yesterday.
	Control	Pre-test	ไม่ปรากฏ
		Posttest	ไม่ปรากฏ
deliver	Experimental	Pre-test	บริการ
		Posttest	My brother delivers the gift for me.
	Control	Pre-test	บริการ
		Posttest	แม่น้ำ

Based on the current findings obtained from the VSK test, the experimental group outperformed the control group, suggesting that narrow reading can help facilitate Thai Buddhist university learners' receptive and productive knowledge of a word in a Buddhist learning context. These findings also highlight the benefits of narrow reading, which work in tandem with previous studies (Chang & Renandya, 2019; Cho, Ahn, & Krashen, 2005; Kang, 2015; Rai sa-nguan & Sukying, 2019).

Results from the questionnaire

Research question 2**:** What is Thai EFL learners' overall attitudes toward the narrow reading approach?

The questionnaires' results showed that Thai Buddhist university participants had a positive attitude towards the narrow reading approach. Specifically, the university participants had an average mean of 4.59 (91.8%, SD = 0.52). The item 12 (I have learned new words) was at 4.95 with the standard deviation of 0.21, showing the highest average. The detailed information is illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4 the results of the attitude questionnaire analysis

No.	Items	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Level
1	I found all the reading materials interesting.	4.43	0.59	High
2	I didn't have difficulty understanding the meaning of words while reading the text.	3.24	1.17	Moderate
3	I always found the same word groups in the reading text.	4.62	0.49	Very high
4	I could understand the meaning of the vocabulary that I frequently encountered when I read more texts.	4.86	0.35	Very high
5	I understood the meaning of vocabulary that reoccurred in reading materials.	4.76	0.43	Very high
6	I think the reoccurrence of vocabulary makes me remember vocabulary better and longer than using a dictionary.	4.81	0.40	Very high
7	The new vocabulary that I have repeatedly learned is more accurate and lasts longer than learning from encountering that vocabulary only once.	4.76	0.53	Very high
8	The length of the materials was suitable.	4.62	0.49	Very high
9	Reading materials were similar in terms of grammatical structure and vocabulary.	4.67	0.48	Very high
10	I want to apply a narrow reading in different situations and skills.	4.52	0.60	Very high
11	Narrow reading makes me more interested in learning English.	4.86	0.35	Very high
12	I have learned new words.	**4.95**	0.21	Very high
13	I prefer English learning after being taught with a narrow reading approach.	4.57	0.50	Very high
Total		4.59	0.52	High

An open-ended item questionnaire was analyzed to better understand Thai Buddhist university participants' attitude towards narrow reading. Overall, the analysis of the result revealed that Thai Buddhist university participants' interest, confidence and attitude towards narrow reading were improved after reading. Table 5 shows the Thai Buddhist university interviewees' responses to narrow reading.

Table 5 Examples of participants' responses to narrow reading

Students	Responses
S1	I found narrow reading more interesting to learn new words.
S2	I think that using narrow reading to read different kinds of content with similar vocabulary enables the readers to remember new words correctly and precisely.
S3	This learning environment makes it easier for me to recognize new words and improve my translation skills.
S4	With the recurrence of the same words, narrow reading is a new teaching model that I like because I had a chance to find out the meaning of unknown words, and I could remember them better.
S5	If we keep practicing this, I am confident we will improve our vocabulary and comprehend the texts.
S6	I think narrow reading could build up my confidence and enthusiasm to read more books and increase my vocabulary knowledge.
S7	Seeing the words frequently made it much easier for me to remember and recall the meaning of the word.

In conclusion, both quantitative and qualitative findings showed that Thai Buddhist university participants had a positive attitude towards narrow reading. Moreover, narrow reading helped facilitate their vocabulary learning in a Buddhist learning context from participants' perspectives.

Discussion

The first research question was whether narrow reading facilitated Thai EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge learning in a Buddhist university context. The data obtained from the vocabulary knowledge scale test of self-report was analyzed to determine the progress of vocabulary knowledge among Thai students in a Buddhist university context to address the first research question. The current findings showed that the experimental group participants incrementally developed their vocabulary knowledge through narrow reading. They could also produce meaningful sentences using the target words, although some written sentences were grammatically correct. These findings suggest that Thai Buddhist university participants benefit from reading texts arranged around common themes compared to the traditional teaching method – reading available texts to recognize the meaning of a word. These findings are congruent with previous studies that found a positive effect of narrow reading on vocabulary learning (Chang & Renandya, 2019; Cho, Ahn, & Krashen, 2005; Kang, 2015; Raisa-nguan & Sukying, 2019).

The development of the narrow reading participants' vocabulary knowledge could be due to their background knowledge of the given topic. Narrow reading participants have repeatedly encountered the same theme, leading to a better understanding of a text. For this reason, the narrow reading participants could easily remember the target words, all of which, in a way, was associated with Buddhism. As such, repeated encounters with the thematic concept, the Buddha's life and related themes, helped students develop semantic networks around the target words. Moreover, the narrow reading approach might have improved students' skill to integrate the content-related target words, thus contributing to the accessibility of the target words efficiently. In this regard, the current findings supported the theory of thematic relevance among the target words and vocabulary learning (Nation, 2013). Researchers on vocabulary acquisition also indicate that multiple encounters of the

target words in recurring texts facilitate vocabulary learning and are essential for vocabulary retention (Kang, 2015; Nation, 2013).

Additionally, the current study showed that narrow reading provided much repetition of target words that are closely linked to reading materials; such ample vocabulary recurrence may have reinforced the form and meaning link of target words. Table 2 illustrates the comparison between experimental participants and their control counterparts. As illustrated in Table 2, the experimental participants, who read six materials related to a topic, improved their knowledge of target words. However, control group participants could barely increase their vocabulary knowledge. This phenomenon could be accounted for by vocabulary recycling. If learners recognize a word they have encountered earlier, it is less difficult for them to recall its meaning. Furthermore, narrow reading provided experimental participants with more exposure to target words, thereby increasing their learning possibility. The current findings also align with previous studies, suggesting the benefits of vocabulary recycling (Chang & Renandya, 2019; Hwang & Nation, 1989; Schmitt & Cater, 2000). The current study also suggests that narrow reading facilitates recognizing the form and meaning of the target words among Thai Buddhist university students, at any rate, in the Buddhist learning context.

Regarding learners' attitudes toward narrow reading, the results showed that Thai Buddhist university learners' attitudes were enhanced after reading. The study results proved the benefits of narrow reading on vocabulary learning with an average of 4.59 (91.8%) on the questionnaire response. This high attitude could be because narrow reading provided learners with great exposure to comprehensible inputs and sufficient target words. Such repeated encounters allow learners to notice and remember a word. Theoretically, noticing a word is the initial stage of learning a word. From this perspective, multiple meetings of the target word help learners easily recall the meaning of it. This claim could be supported by participants' responses on the questionnaire item (I could understand the meaning of the vocabulary that I frequently encountered when I read more texts) with an average of 4.86 (97.2%). The written questionnaire responses also provided evidence to support such a claim:

> With the recurrence of the same words, narrow reading is a new teaching model that I like because I had a chance to find out the meaning of unknown words and I could remember them better (student 5).

> Seeing the words frequently made it much easier for me to remember and recall the meaning of the word (student 7).

The analysis of the current results also reveals that narrow reading increases learners' interest and vocabulary acquisition confidence. Specifically, the result showed an average of 4.86 (97.2%) on the questionnaire item (narrow reading makes me more interested in learning English), indicating a very high level of interest in reading. Participants' written responses could support this statement:

> I found narrow reading more interesting to learn new words (student 1).

> I think narrow reading could build up my confidence and enthusiasm to read more books and increase my vocabulary knowledge (student 6).

Overall, the current findings indicated narrow reading benefited Thai Buddhist university learners' vocabulary learning and enhanced their interest and confidence in reading. These findings provided support to previous studies that narrow reading benefits L2 learners' acquisition of vocabulary (Chang & Renandya, 2019; Cho, Ahn, & Krashen, 2005; Kang, 2015; Rai sa-nguan, 2019; Rai sa-nguan & Sukying, 2019)

Conclusion

The current study examined the effect of narrow reading on vocabulary learning in a Thai Buddhist university learning context. The analysis of the present findings indicated that narrow reading consolidated students' word knowledge and enlarged their vocabulary by connecting previously known forms of the word to other unknown forms. Overall, the results indicated the benefits of narrow reading in enhancing Thai learners' vocabulary growth. Specifically, narrow reading enhanced learners' ability to recognize and recall the form-meaning link of a word from multiple encounters and their ability to appropriately use it in context. The results also showed Thai Buddhist university learners' positive attitude towards narrow reading. More precisely, learners' interest, confidence and attitude toward

narrow reading were remarkably increased after reading. The current results provided empirical evidence to support previous studies that significant roles of narrow reading in vocabulary learning (Chang & Renandya, 2019; Cho, Ahn, & Krashen, 1994, 2005; Kang, 2015; Rai sa-nguan & Sukying, 2019).

Recommendations

This present study's findings lead to some recommendations for further research— first, the results of the current research related to the integration of reading and vocabulary acquisition. Vocabulary acquisition could reinforce reading comprehension, as these skills are mutually beneficial. Within an overall Buddhist learning environment, the Buddhist participants in this study were familiar with the uniqueness of beliefs and traditions as practiced in the Thai nation. Consequently, when they read the English texts that integrated the words and phrases about Buddhism, they learned to construct the meanings of these words and phrases in the Buddhist texts. Also, they could connect ideas in the texts with their background knowledge, helping them understand implications. Thus, the English teaching approach met the needs of the students.

Additionally, Goldenberg (2004) stated that the ability to apply such experience or prior knowledge significantly increases as children advance in their literacy development. Children comprehend texts effectively if the message contains elements compatible with the children's natal culture—familiarity with words, syntax, and text-structure impacts readers' success in constructing meaning from texts.

Future studies may include a delayed follow-up test a few weeks after completing narrow reading activities to measure the retention target. The effects of narrow reading activities in the long term should also be examined. Finally, the influence of other dependent variables should also be investigated. For instance, whether the narrow reading approach improves other language skills such as writing or speaking, could be explored.

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