

The Case for Narrow Reading

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Most foreign and second language classes provide students with exposure to a variety of topics. Beginning level texts typically jump from topic to topic (e.g. "shopping," "ordering food," "families"), "readers" usually include several different kinds of short articles (e.g. "nonverbal communication," "mind, body and health,") and short stories, and introductory courses in literature usually give the student only one short example of each author's work. Only later, in advanced courses, does a second language student "specialize," e.g. by taking classes in "20th century fiction," and only the most advanced students focus on the work of a single author. The assumption behind this is that exposure to different topics, genres, and styles is beneficial.

This may be all wrong. It may be that narrow input is much more efficient for second language acquisition. It may be much better if second language acquirers specialize early rather than late. This means reading several books by one author or about a single topic of interest. (I focus here on reading, but the idea of narrow input has been applied to listening as well; see e.g. Krashen, 1996; Rodrigo and Krashen, 1996; Dupuy, 1999).

The case for narrow reading is based on the idea that the acquisition of both structure and vocabulary comes from many exposures in a comprehensible context, that is, we acquire new structures and words when we understand messages, many messages, that they encode. Narrow reading facilitates this process in several ways.

First, since each writer has favorite expressions and a distinctive style, and each topic has its own vocabulary and discourse, narrow reading provides built-in review.

Second, background knowledge is a tremendous facilitator of comprehension. An acquirer of English reading a John Grisham novel who understands the legal system in the U.S. will understand the book much better than someone unfamiliar with courts and legal procedures in the U.S. The reader with better background will also acquire more English from the novel, because it is more comprehensible. Narrow readers gain more contextual knowledge as they read narrowly: The more one reads in one area, the more one learns about the area, and the easier one finds subsequent reading in the area (and the more one acquires of the language). Reading one John Grisham novel will make subsequent John Grisham novels more comprehensible.

An example of this can be termed "the first few pages" effect (pointed out to me by Mari Wesche; see also Yang, 2001). Intermediate foreign language students, reading a novel in the foreign language, often report that they find the first few pages of a new author's work tough going. After this initial difficulty, the rest of the book goes much easier. This is due to the fact that the context, the story, was new, and, in addition, the reader had not adjusted to the author's style. Providing only short and varied selections never allows language acquirers to get beyond this stage. Instead, it forces them to move from frustration to frustration.

It may be argued that narrow reading produces only the ability to read in one area. This is not true. Deep reading in any topic will provide exposure to a tremendous amount of syntax and vocabulary that is used in other topics. Any technical field, for example, will use "subtechnical" vocabulary, words such as "function," "inference," "isolate," "relation," etc. (Cowan, 1974). Also, readers typically do not read only one author or in one area for the rest of their lives; they gradually expand their reading (for evidence that high school students gradually expand their reading interests as they read more, see LaBrant, 1958).

The clearest advantage of narrow reading, however, is that it is potentially very motivating. In any anthology, it is certain that most topics are not of great interest to most readers. The combination of new vocabulary, unfamiliar style, lack of context, and lack of interest in the subject matter insures that much reading remains an exercise in deliberate decoding. In contrast, narrow reading on a topic of real interest has a chance of resulting in the reader really reading for the message, for meaning, in early stages of language acquisition.

There is some evidence supporting the narrow reading idea. Lamme (1976) found that good readers in English as a first language tended to read more books by a single author and books from a series, a result that many readers of this paper can identify with, former devotees of Nancy Drew, the Hardy Boys and Bobsey Twins. More recently, Cho and Krashen (1994, 1995) reported considerable enthusiasm for reading and substantial vocabulary development among adult second language acquirers who read books in the Sweet Valley series; readers rapidly moved from Sweet Valley Kids (second grade level) to Sweet Valley Twins (fourth grade level) to Sweet Valley High (fifth and sixth grade level). Several readers in this study had never read a book in English for pleasure before, but became fanatic Sweet Valley fans.

Here are some suggestions for those who want to see for themselves if this works, who want to try narrow reading in a language they have some competence in, but want to improve in:

Lower your standards. Read only material in the second language that is genuinely fun and interesting, material that is so easy that you probably feel guilty reading it in your primary language. This is your excuse to read comics, magazines, detective stories, romances, etc. There is no shame in reading translations.

Reading at this stage does not have to make you a better person, does not have to give you insight into other cultures, and does not have to improve your knowledge of history or science. But if you do enough narrow reading, you will be much better prepared to read "demanding" texts.

Don't worry about pushing ahead rapidly to harder and to different material. This will happen on its own. The best way to expand might be a gradual movement from one field to a closely related field, taking advantage of the overlap in context and language.

If the book or magazine is too hard, or not really interesting, stop reading and find something else. The goal is to find material that is so engaging, and so easy, that you will forget that it is in another language. You want reading material that requires no self-discipline to read.

Carry the book or magazine with you everywhere. You may feel that you don't have time to read, but if you carry your book with you, the world will conspire to give you time. Take your book out when you are standing in line, waiting for a bus, and when waiting for service. (It may be my imagination, but I have the feeling that waiters, hotel clerks, and other service personnel suddenly recognize your existence and became very eager to help when they see you reading.)

I have been doing this myself. For the last five years, I have been ordering and reading Star Trek novels in French and German from Amazon, translations from English. They are inauthentic, have no cultural information, and make little contribution to my intellectual life. But they are easy to read (I have a great deal of background knowledge in this area), and very pleasurable. Narrow reading works.

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