
NARROW LISTENING: A SUBSET OF EXTENSIVE LISTENING

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ABSTRACT

Though narrow listening is not a new approach in developing listening competence, the effectiveness of narrow listening has hardly been reported in the research literature. Narrow listening refers to learners doing a large quantity of listening practice but focusing on the same theme or the same author's work systematically and consistently for a period of time. When they are familiar with one theme or one author's work, they move on to the next one. Narrow listening can be seen as another subset of extensive listening because both require learners to receive a massive amount of aural input. In this talk, I will discuss the advantages of using narrow listening in teaching L2 and how to choose materials for implementing narrow listening in an L2 listening course.

Keywords: narrow listening, extensive listening, narrow reading

Narrow Listening: Where did it originate?

Narrow listening was first introduced by Krashen in 1996; however, the term was in fact extended from Krashen's own narrow reading (1981). Narrow reading is defined as reader focus on the work of single author or single topic over the course of a number of texts for an extended period of time (Krashen, 1996; Schmitt and Carter, 2000). The concept of narrow reading perhaps can be applied to narrow listening as Krashen notes that narrow listening will be most useful for lower level L2 learners because they can take advantage of the background knowledge of the previous text to aid their comprehension of the present text. Narrow listening can, therefore, be seen as a subset of extensive listening because both require learners to receive a massive amount of aural input. To be more specific, extensive listening is a general term for listening to a massive amount of aural input for an extended period of time; however, its input features may involve several forms, such as wide listening and narrow listening. Both wide and narrow listening can be assisted or unassisted, such as supported by written print or pictures. They differ, however, in how materials are organized and studied. Narrow listening hence refers to learner focus on the same theme or the same author's works systematically and consistently for a period of time, and then move on to the next theme or author. In contrast to narrow listening, wide listening/reading means that learners randomly study whatever they like without particularly

focusing on any author or theme. In this talk, wide listening is used just to be in contrast to narrow listening. Like narrow reading, there are several advantages for using narrow listening in L2 learning. From the point of view of background knowledge, topical familiarity has been found to be helpful to comprehension. If learners are exposed to the same topic, they will become familiar with the same topic and will have better background knowledge for the input (see below). While listening with familiar background knowledge, they will be able to pay more attention to the linguistic features (Chang & Read, 2006, 2007). From the perspective of frequency of word occurrence and distribution, research has demonstrated that learners need multiple exposures to acquire a word; therefore, in narrow listening, key words in the relevant topics will recur, so learners will have multiple exposures to the same words and are more likely become familiar with these words and thus ease the lexical burden (Hwang & Nation, 1989; Schmitt & Carter, 2000). From the point of view of listening/reading fluency, if learners possess better background knowledge of a topic and are familiar with topical vocabulary, they are more likely to be able to process the input more efficiently and eventually become fluent.

Narrow listening: Its advantages

Listeners or readers often rely on two principal sources of information in the process of aural input: linguistic knowledge and background knowledge. Efficient comprehension requires the linguistic competence to link the textual information with one's own background knowledge. In the following, the role of the two forms of knowledge on comprehension will be reviewed and discussed.

A. Enriching background knowledge

Background knowledge may be defined differently in studies. For example, some researchers define it as general knowledge of a discipline while other researchers may define it as the knowledge of specific topics, e.g., the Hong Kong pro-democracy protest. Others may consider background knowledge as cultural knowledge or assumptions, such as English Boxing Day. A number of studies have established the relationship between background knowledge and ESL reading comprehension. Carrell (1983) posits that comprehension is an interaction of background knowledge and the text. The text itself does not carry the meaning; however, it provides directions for listeners/readers as how they should retrieve or construct the intended meaning from their previous knowledge. Nunan (1985) also pointed out that providing knowledge of the linguistic elements and then expecting the learner to understand any text materials encountered is inadequate; learners

must possess some fundamental schematic knowledge to achieve comprehension.

Many studies have demonstrated that background knowledge has a facilitative effect on learners' listening comprehension. For example, Markham and Latham (1987) investigated whether religious background influenced listening comprehension. Their study revealed that Christian-background students recalled many more idea units and details than Moslem-background ones on Christian passages, and vice versa. The neutral group, however, recalled fewer idea units and had fewer elaborations but had more distortions than either the Christian or the Moslem-background students. A comparable result was found by Teng (1996), who investigated senior high school students' listening comprehension with a familiar topic, the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival, and a less familiar topic, American Thanksgiving Day. These two studies revealed that religious and cultural knowledge did facilitate L2 listening comprehension.

Other research that looked at background knowledge of a discipline produced mixed results. For example, Hansen and Jensen (1995) investigated the effect of prior study of a topic. Positive results were confirmed in only five of the eleven lectures, and the significant prior knowledge variable was more likely to show up in technical lectures rather than in non-technical lectures. Consistent results were found only when prior knowledge related to students' religious and cultural backgrounds; other studies showed mixed findings. The inconsistent findings are not surprising because researchers used different ways to assess learners' knowledge; for example, the use of pretest measurements, pre-listening exercises, or questionnaires, and self-reporting. Moreover, different researchers used different approaches to measure students' listening proficiency. With these different variables mixing together, it is naturally difficult to conclude how familiarity with a topic or discipline affects listening comprehension. Though not all studies demonstrated positive or significant effect on improving listening comprehension level, the importance of background knowledge on listening comprehension is evident; and Chang and Read (2006) reported that providing EFL listeners with background knowledge of a topic is the most effective approach to enhance comprehension compared to repeated listening or teaching vocabulary. Therefore, it is desirable to organize the input that may better background knowledge and facilitate comprehension.

B. Repeated exposure of vocabulary in narrow reading

The second important form of knowledge for comprehension is linguistic knowledge. One of the most important elements of linguistic knowledge is "vocabulary." What role vocabulary plays in narrow reading or listening has not been studied extensively, nor is it well known how it affects comprehension; however, some corpus-driven studies might

provide the profile of lexical distribution in wide versus narrow reading texts.

Some studies have shown that narrowly reading a series of related texts recycles vocabulary more effectively than randomly reading unrelated texts. For example, Hwang and Nation (1989) looked at the vocabulary load in the newspapers at two ways. One is selecting a story and its subsequent follow-up stories, and the other is randomly selecting newspaper stories. The stories in the former way are related, but those in the latter are unrelated. They analyzed 20 sets of four related stories (on the election in France in 1988) and 20 groups of four unrelated stories in order to compare the effect that the two ways of selecting stories have on the repetitions of words outside the 2,000 most frequent words. They found that selecting related stories had a major effect on repetitions outside the 2,000 most frequent words, and the density of new word families in the unrelated did not decrease as much as it did in the related stories. The density of word families in the related stories decreased statistically significantly from 18.0 in the first story 15.9, 14.9, and only 12.8 in the second, third, and the fourth story; however, the unrelated stories showed no significant changes, from 16.9 in the first story to 18.1, 20.1 and 18.1 in the each unrelated stories. In terms of the total repetitions of the word families outside the first 2,000 words, the results show that in the four related stories, only 62 word families were outside the first 2,000 words but there were 73 one in the unrelated stories. This study shows that reading related texts can reduce the vocabulary load and provide optimal conditions for acquiring advanced vocabulary.

A similar study was conducted by Schmitt and Carter (2000), who analyzed the vocabulary from two sets of articles containing the same number of running words (7,843). One set was from a series of nine newspaper stories about the death of Princess Diana, and the other set were nine stories randomly selected from the same newspapers. The study showed that the Diana-related stories contained 156 fewer types and that words were repeated more often than in the unrelated stories. Schmitt and Carter hence concluded that the reading of related stories lowers the lexical load for L2 learners, which might allow learners allow for earlier contact with authentic reading materials.

Sutarsyah, Nation, and Kennedy (1994) compared the vocabulary in an economics text and a set of 160 approximately 2,000 word unrelated academic texts. Both contain approximately 30,000 word counts. The analyses show that there were 9,469 word types and 5,438 word families occurring in the economics texts, whereas 21,399 word types and 12,744 word families occurred in the random academic texts. This meant that there are a larger number of word types and word families in the randomly unrelated academic texts than in the economic texts. The findings suggest that reading unrelated texts requires a larger vocabulary to understand than related texts about a single topic. The analysis also

shows that there were many more encounters with technical words in the economic texts than in the random texts. From the perspective of vocabulary load, the researchers further suggest that teachers or course designers should consider choosing only a few themes by using coherent texts rather than using a series of unrelated texts. If developing fluency is the focus of a course, they suggest narrowing the content focus by considering the use of one coherent text, which may allow learners to focus their attention on skill development, such as improving students' reading rates.

Gardner (2004) examined how the lexical differences between expository and narrative texts used by fifth grade elementary pupils could affect children's potential vocabulary learning through extensive reading. A total of 1,443,336 tokens from 28 narrative and 28 expository texts were analyzed. The analysis shows that narrative texts contain a greater proportion of general high frequency words than the expository ones, which implied that narratives require fewer lexical demands on children and thus provides a better condition for incidental acquisition. Apart from classifying texts by different discourse modes, Gardner also divided the texts into thematically related and thematically unrelated and found of the 32,913 total types in the corpus, 23,857 (72.5%) are outside the high frequency lists. Gardner thus claims that not all reading is the same. The choice of texts, themes —related or unrelated — can have a profound effect on the type of words the children can learn, the number of encounters with certain types of words, and the amount of prior vocabulary knowledge needed to actually learn new words during extensive reading.

In addition to printed materials, more recently, Rodgers and Webb (2011) looked at the potential of learning English words from viewing related versus unrelated television episodes. Rodgers and Webb (2011) analyzed 288 television episodes to examine the potential of learning English vocabulary from watching television. The scripts contain a total of 1,330,268 running words and had 203 hours of running time. Among the 288 episodes, 142 were related programs from a single season and 146 were randomly selected unrelated programs. They found that when the running words were equivalent in the two types of episodes, related programs contain fewer word families than the unrelated ones, and also the low frequency word families between 4,000 and 14,000 were 10 or more times likely to recur than the unrelated random program. Rodgers and Webb thus suggest that if a learner does not have high comprehension of television programs, it may be more effective for them to watch different episodes of a single program rather than single episodes of different programs. By doing so, they can accumulate the background knowledge and hence improve their comprehension.

These corpus-driven studies from analyzing newspapers, textbooks, narrative texts,

and television programs provide consistent evidence that texts on the same or related topic are more likely to have more encounters with specialized English words of that topic than unrelated texts do. Some empirical studies also provided evidence showing that L2 learners acquire more vocabulary knowledge through reading related texts than reading random ones (Cho, Ahn, & Krashen, 2005; Cho & Krashen, 1994, Kang, 2015). For example, the four L2 adults, who read the *Sweet Valley* series for pleasure in Cho & Krashen's study, could pick up an average of 62% of the unknown words. Recently, Kang (2015) worked with two groups of senior high school students; one group read four thematically related articles on second-hand smoking, and the other group read four unrelated articles over a one-month period. Positive results further demonstrated that reading related articles led to higher gains than reading unrelated ones in acquiring both receptive and productive knowledge.

Narrow listening: Some empirical evidence

The study by Cho and Krashen (1994), is called narrow reading. Because this study was very successful, he then extended the concepts of narrow reading to narrow listening for his own Spanish learning (Krashen, 1996). He prepared a tape-recorder and asked a question to some Spanish speakers and recorded what they said. He then played back at his leisure and found it very comprehensible, helpful, and interesting. Following Krashen's method, Dupuy (1999) tape-recorded some short interviews by different proficient French speakers on the same topic and asked his students to listen to them and also filled out a questionnaire. His students reported that narrow listening is very interesting and very helpful in improving their listening comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, and confidence. Kimura and Ssali (2009) implemented a combined narrow listening and reading course on Japanese university freshmen. The first author taught listening by using a film based on a true story, *Hotel Rwanda*, as learning materials, and the second author taught reading using materials that were about Rwanda and Uganda. The study did not provide empirical data for the learning outcome, but feedback from students was very positive. Respondents particularly mentioned that language learned from narrow reading and listening was retained even after one year.

These above three studies have demonstrated that narrow listening is helpful; however, no empirical, quantitative data support the position, and no comparison groups and control group were involved in these studies, which are conditions that limit our understanding of narrow listening. As previously mentioned, narrow listening involves many characteristics that are different from wide listening. The differences may have a different effect on language learning and skills development, e.g., vocabulary learning and listening

fluency development

Narrow listening: How do we do it?

In this section, let us look at how to organize texts for implementing narrow listening for beginners or lower level students, who usually need more assistance and guidance than higher level students. There are many ways of organizing texts that language practitioners may consider when implementing narrow listening, for example, selecting texts by the same author, by the same genre, by the same title, or by the same linguistic level. Each way of organizing text may affect your students' comprehension to some degree. Let us take audio graded readers for example. As shown below, *The Elephant Man*, *Grace Darling*, and *The Mysterious Death of Charles Bravo* are true stories written by Tim Vicary. It has fewer word types than *Sherlock Holmes and the Duke's Son*, *Sherlock Holmes Short Stories*, and *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story*, which are written (simplified) by different authors though the three books are the same genre on crime. Another easy way is selecting the same title but published by different publishers. This has been found particularly effective for low-level students. For example, students may study *The Railway Children* published by Penguin, containing only 549 word types. After reading it, students can move on to *The Railway Children* published by Compass; it uses 1,029 word types, but students will not consider it difficult because they have had the background knowledge about the story; they can then easily guess the meaning of the new words. Finally, they move to *The Railway Children* published by Oxford Bookworms. It is longer, containing more details and using more word types. This way of input was well-received by lower level students because they do not have to change from one topic to another when they read a new book, so they can put more of their attention into acquiring linguistic knowledge and find the differences between each level.

Word types in different text organization

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Mean
Same author same genre — <i>The Elephant Man</i> ; <i>Grace Darling</i> ; <i>The Mysterious Death of Charles Bravo</i>	581	783	1060	1473
Same title — <i>The Railway Children</i> published by Penguin, Compass, and Oxford Bookworms	549	1029	1077	1507
Same genre different author — <i>Sherlock Holmes' and the Duke's Son</i> ; <i>Sherlock Holmes Short Stories</i> ; <i>The Last Sherlock Holmes Story</i>				

680

784

1214

1642

In addition to using graded readers and their corresponding audio texts, which are more suitable for lower level students, there are many other interesting resources that can be considered for more advanced L2 learners, such as TED talks and BBC Learning English. Overall, to enhance L2 students' learning effectiveness, language teachers should guide their students to select appropriate materials for themselves.

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