

# Using Narrow Reading to Develop Fluency

by GUY REDMER

Most teachers who use textbooks know that they are restrictive by nature. Units jump from topic to topic without recycling much vocabulary. This has often left me wondering how to truly develop reading fluency in terms of word recognition.

One effective solution may be narrow reading (NR)—that is, reading several texts about a single, narrow topic. NR may involve reading five short texts about water pollution or constantly immersing oneself in articles about Asian cuisine. NR is championed by some as benefiting word recognition due to a decreased vocabulary load; that is because in NR, a core set of word items is recycled. The vocabulary is far more salient, allowing for a noticing effect (Han and D'Angelo 2009)—the idea that noticing certain features of language aids acquisition.

NR has been the topic of a handful of studies. Notably, running news stories have been found to contain significantly higher word repetition and fewer word types than unrelated stories (Kyongho and Nation 1989; Schmitt and Carter 2000). In an experimental inquiry, Kang (2015) found that NR resulted in greater receptive and productive knowledge of target vocabulary. Chang and Millett (2017) explored the effects of NR on reading speed and comprehension with significant results. And there are both L1 and L2 findings indicating that repetition in context leads to reading fluency (Chen and Truscott 2010; Webb 2007).

Based on what we know about NR to date, I was inspired to try it as a supplement in an undergraduate English as a foreign language (EFL) course. I teach in Taiwan, and every academic year one of my university classes is made up of non-English majors. I decided

to do NR with this group and have them record reading speed as well as answer comprehension questions. I theorized that if the benefits of NR were present, it could be highly motivating.

## MATERIALS

I used running news stories, as these can be found in both print and digital formats. To be clear, a running news story is one that is continued over a period of time as the story develops. Similarly, NR can focus on a single news story covered by various media outlets. To access this material, teachers worldwide can explore English-language newspapers in their country. One advantage of newspapers is that they are often available in both print and online formats. There are also online news sources designed for English learners, such as Voice of America ([learningenglish.voanews.com](http://learningenglish.voanews.com)) and News in Levels ([www.newsinlevels.com](http://www.newsinlevels.com)). The latter offers the same news story in three levels. If all the levels are generally comprehensible to learners, this format could



also be used as a type of NR. Both of these sites feature an audio recording of each text.

## PROCEDURE

To begin, a teacher needs to identify reading topics that would be perceived as interesting to his or her particular class. In my case, in a fairly short amount of time, I was able to find enough material to make sets of recent running news stories. They were accessed from one of Taiwan’s English-language newspapers and a website covering Taiwan news in English.

After a teacher selects an appropriate topic (or multiple topics), the next step is to determine readability level and vocabulary load. This leads to another reason that running news stories are optimal choices: typically, the length is relatively short, so a teacher can scan the articles to determine whether there is a high degree of word repetition between them. But this information can also be just a click away. In determining vocabulary load, I used lexical profiling software called VocabProfile English ([www.lextutor.ca/vp/eng/](http://www.lextutor.ca/vp/eng/)). It’s free and includes a tutorial. A user can simply copy and paste any text up to 35,000 words. The program will then analyze the text for a range of features, which include a list of words from the most frequent 1,000 word families, words from the second–most frequent 1,000 word families, content words, and any words from the Academic Word List (sometimes referred to as the AWL). Proper nouns are separated. Importantly, each word type is listed along with the number of tokens. Tokens are the total number of words, whereas types are distinct words in a text. (For example, in

the sentence *The teacher prepared lessons for the morning classes and evening classes*, there are 11 tokens but only nine types: *the, teacher, prepared, lessons, for, morning, classes, and, evening.*) Moreover, a type–token ratio is calculated. This information is necessary to determine whether there is indeed a high degree of word repetition with fewer word types overall.

After the texts are selected, comprehension questions can be made for each reading or for the set as a whole. I opted to write five multiple-choice questions for a whole set, although some teachers may prefer questions after each reading. My questions largely focused on main ideas and key details. To illustrate, one of the NR topics was Princess Mako of Japan and her engagement. One question was, “Who is the woman marrying?” Another question was, “What has not yet been decided about the marriage?” Five choices followed each question. The questions were relatively easy to write. The purpose of the questions was to simply confirm that the students comprehended the readings.

The teacher’s preparation is summarized in Table 1.

Each set comprised five articles on a particular running news story. The word count for articles averaged between 400 and 500 words. Printed sets were stapled, typically with a total of five pages per set. They were distributed to students at the beginning of the class. Of course, stapling the readings is not necessary if a teacher finds it impractical. Also, in some class environments, it may be more

Step	Rationale
1. Determine a topic and select materials.	Topics should be perceived as useful and/or interesting to learners in order for NR to be maintained.
2. Check vocabulary load manually or with software such as VocabProfile.	This will confirm the type–token ratio and degree of word overlap.
3. Write or select comprehension questions.	This measurement will confirm that reading for meaning is taking place.

**Table 1. Preparation for NR of texts**

efficient to project the readings onto a screen and thereby save paper.

The students were instructed not to go back and reread any text. They were also told not to skim or read at a forced rate. An online stopwatch was projected onto a screen for the entire class to see clearly. Naturally, timing can be done by a clock or watch, smartphone, or other device. If done this way, the teacher could prewrite time intervals on the board and point them out as the time counts down. I told the students to begin reading upon hearing my signal. Immediately after reading, students were to check the screen, record their time, and calculate their reading rate. Finally, students were instructed to answer the reading-comprehension questions after all five readings.

Thus, the basic in-class procedure for students was as follows:

1. Silently read the article.
2. Note the time.
3. Calculate the reading rate.
4. Repeat with the next article.
5. Answer comprehension questions.

The entire class consistently got excellent scores on the reading-comprehension questions. But what was more interesting was that reading speed increased significantly from reading to reading within each set. Moreover, all students later reported that they perceived some improved word recognition through NR.

## CONCLUSION

My classroom experience with NR involved young adult learners and news stories. The dedicated time was approximately 40 minutes of a 100-minute class. There was no direct instruction of vocabulary offered. But many variations are possible, of course. Some are as follows:

- Topics can supplement a textbook. This would recycle and reinforce vocabulary that students may be required to know for exams.
- Graded readers or short fiction can be used, especially with younger or lower-level learners. In this scenario, each student would read different versions of the same title while keeping a record of reading speed.
- Sets of NR readings could be spread out over a number of classes. This would have the added benefit of repeated exposure over a period of time.

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