The case for combining narrow reading and listening

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As an advocate of input-based language learning, Krashen (1981) proposed narrow reading. Instead of hopping from topic to topic, narrow reading in any single topic area provides rich exposure to related vocabulary and contexts. Topic familiarity and contextual knowledge is developed, decreasing learners' cognitive load and facilitating reading comprehension. Second language readers thus learn to read more quickly and fluently. The conceptual and pedagogical leap between the argument for narrow reading (Krashen, 1981, 2004) and the argument for narrow listening (Krashen, 1996) is not large because familiar contexts are also beneficial in comprehending naturally used language. Since a case for explicitly integrating these two pedagogical practices has not been made, we explore the instructional potential of combining them. In addition, we report on a case study of a successful course coordination project that was conceptually based on the pedagogical significance of narrow input, one that proved helpful in creating a rich environment for language development.

Background

Narrow reading started as the antithesis of the prevalent instructional approach. It is typical that course books move through a range of situations and topics. Educational writers and classroom instructors seem to think that a wide variety of topics in the learning materials are advantageous for the learner. Another common assumption is that language learning should move from general to specific. Students start out by dealing with a range of general situations, genres, authors, styles, and topics. Later, at the advanced stage, they can specialize in areas of interest. However, Krashen (1981, 2004) thought otherwise—that learners can and should specialize earlier rather than later.

Krashen's input hypothesis (1985) claims language is acquired when learners are exposed to a large amount of comprehensible input, at or just beyond their present level of language knowledge and skills. Comprehensible input is easy to provide through narrow reading because common

Keywords

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This paper explores the benefits of combining narrow reading and listening in instructional contexts. Topic familiarity has been found to be helpful for vocabulary learning as well as reading and listening comprehension. Reading and listening on a familiar topic make it possible to use specific background knowledge and recycle language learned in context. To demonstrate how purposely enriched contextual knowledge can be advantageous for learners learning to read and listen, we report on a course coordination project based on the idea of narrow input. From this project emerged two recommended pedagogical approaches: presenting information *from specific to general* and *with both spoken and written input together on a single topic*.

本編は、外国語学習の初級・中級の段階で、特定のトピックに関連した教材を集中して学ぶことによって、読解と聴解の訓練を同時進行で、より効率的に・効果的に行う手法を検討する。教材を特定のトピックに限定することの利点を、平和教育をテーマとしたコース連携の実践例を紹介しながら議論する。

vocabulary and discourse is often repeated within single topics or similar contexts. Narrow reading also makes multiple exposures to the same language features possible in instructional settings. In other words, it provides for a sort of built-in review (Krashen, 1981). Schmitt and Carter (2000) compared general and narrow reading texts, finding the latter contained more unique high-frequency content words and fewer overall word types (such as proper nouns). This lighter vocabulary learning load helps make narrow reading texts more accessible to learners. It also supports and encourages reading comprehension, enthusiasm, and vocabulary acquisition (Cho, Ahn, & Krashen, 1994). The cumulative effect of narrow reading thus provides a fruitful learning environment for further language development.

The case for narrow listening has been established in a similar manner. Comprehension of aural language input constitutes a basis for learning to listen. Repeated listening to recorded casual speech in an area of students' interest is helpful for developing listening skills and language competence in general, as well as for reducing stress associated with second-language listening (Caspino, 2005; Dupuy, 1999).

Although similar, narrow reading/listening can be differentiated pedagogically from extensive reading/listening in several ways, as Table 1 indicates. In general, the former approach is more teacher-centered and controlled than the latter.

Additionally, there are parallels between content-based instruction (CBI) and narrow reading/listening, primarily in their meaning-focused approaches. CBI is meant to kill two birds with one stone, simultaneously facilitating acquisition of language and academic content in immersive, bilingual educational contexts (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 2003). On the other hand, in narrow reading/listening, content is utilized to promote language learning, with the primary aim of acquiring language skills in meaningful contexts. In short, narrow reading/ listening has theoretically discrete underpinnings from other pedagogical approaches despite noticeable common features.

Why combine narrow reading and listening?

Combining narrow reading and listening into one integrated pedagogical approach has the potential to effectively and efficiently enhance language learning in several ways. In narrow reading, a key advantage is the recycling of common words within identical or similar contexts (Schmitt & Carter, 2000). We can infer this also takes place during narrow listening. Memory researchers have suggested our orthographic processing is connected to phonological processing, meaning that it is easier to learn a word if we can pronounce it. According to Baddeley, Gathercole, and Papagno (1998), successful vocabulary learning depends upon the function of a phonological loop, where a phonological image of a word is formed before its permanent memory structure is constructed in our mental lexicon. This mental image is formed via repeated exposure in different contexts before being permanently stored. Thus for acquisition to occur, words need to be met in both spoken and written forms repeatedly over time. Furthermore, thematic clustering facilitates vocabulary learning (Tinkham, 1993), in that words are better learned if they are presented around a theme—something that regularly occurs in narrow reading/listening.

Researchers on L2 reading and listening generally agree that contextual knowledge helps comprehension because higher-level knowledge makes room for activating top-down strategies (Grabe, 2004; Vandergrift, 2007). Non-native speakers especially rely on topic knowledge for comprehension (Tyler, 2001). Since aural-language processing skills are less developed for non-native speakers, processing load consumes the majority of their working memory (WM). However, Tyler (2001) demonstrated that topic knowledge successfully helped reduce

Table 1. Comparison of narrow reading/listening and extensive reading/listening approaches

	Narrow reading/listening	Extensive reading/listening
Topics & content	Chosen by teacher or via consensus with learners	Chosen by learner
Staying on topic	Essential	Optional
Pedagogic priority	Language development	Learner autonomy
Teaching style	Teacher-centered	Learner-centered

the WM requirements of L2 listeners. Chen and Graves (1995) also found that activating specific information through text previewing led to better text comprehension than activating more general background knowledge in reading. More studies are needed to investigate the effects of appropriate background knowledge in L2 comprehension in instructional contexts (Grabe, 2004), a situation we believe can be addressed by researching the combining of narrow reading and listening activities.

Case study

To support the case for implementing a narrow reading/listening approach, a report on a course coordination project between the two authors of this paper will now be discussed. This project was based on a single theme (peace education) and completed with a total of 49 1st-year, low-intermediate students at a Japanese university. The first author, Harumi Kimura, taught listening to her class using *Hotel Rwanda*, a film based on a true story about the conflict between two ethnic groups in this central African nation. In the movie, a hotel manager saves the lives of about 1,200 Rwandan citizens, including his own family. A range of issues in the film were covered, such as the effects of ethnic conflict on ordinary people, damage to the local environment, economy, and the helplessness of international organizations in coping with the crisis. In class, the DVD was first shown without subtitles to provide the students with the gist of the story.

After a variety of activities designed to develop both top-down and bottom-up listening skills were completed, the DVD was shown again with subtitles. An assignment to reconstruct a segment of the story in writing was given as homework. The second author of this paper, Vick Ssali (a Ugandan national) taught the reading portion of this coordination project and used materials consisting of originally written passages about his country and the conflict in neighboring Rwanda, covering global issues such as racial conflict, human rights, and environmental problems.

Both teachers reported to each other regularly during short, informal meetings about what had been done in previous classes. At first, the recycling of vocabulary was accidental rather than elaborately planned beforehand, but eventually both teachers were gradually able to make greater intentional use of the built-in nature of review found within narrow reading and listening, as Figure 1 exemplifies. Notice the word *hatred* appears in both texts.

Another linguistic advantage was that neither instructor had to spend much time teaching specialized words. For example, terms such as *genocide*, *ethnic conflict*, *tribe*, and *in exile* were crucial in this context, but since they were introduced in the reading sections almost immediately, the listening component could simply move on with the assurance that learners could match the pronunciations of those expressions with their orthographic representations. Knowledge of these repeated expres-

Reading passage 1	Listening task
The story of Rwanda is a story of war and *genocide*. It is a story of man killing man. The story of Hotel Rwanda is also a story of human kindness and love in the middle of **hatred**.	**Directions:** *Complete the conversation with the words listed below:* PAUL: Hundreds. It was too many to (A). DUBE: Why are people so (B)?. PAUL: (C). (D). I don't know. **hatred** count cruel insanity

Figure 1. Example of language recycling

Reading passage	Comprehension questions
A big *ethnic conflict* between the two *tribes* had begun. By the time the country became **independent** from Belgium, many Tutsis lived *in exile*. The Hutu became very **powerful**. The Tutsis who stayed in Rwanda lived in **fear** for many years.	a. Were the U.N. operations **powerful** enough to stop the killing? Why? Why not? b. Were the Tutsis in **fear** of revenge? c. How did Paul stay **independent** from both tribes?

Figure 2. Recycling of high-frequency words between reading and listening activities

sions helped students focus on other basic, high-frequency words embedded within the texts. The text samples in Figure 2 exemplify how this process took place. *Specialized* and **high-frequency** words were first marked in the reading text and then intentionally recycled during the listening comprehension questions of output-based activities.

Language learned in well-constructed contexts was expected to stay solid in the learners' minds. Feedback from the students indicated they were deeply impressed with the movie and the personal recount of the issues by Vick Ssali. Students also mentioned that the language learned was easier to retain because of their affective involvement. Three out of five students interviewed a year after the program ended unequivocally said, "I still remember it well." One of them added, "It was a learning experience I will never forget." Perhaps one reason for this success was that the spoken and written experiences via the film and first hand accounts provided an enhanced L2 input, helping the learners store the language for future use in both speaking and writing. Combining narrow reading and listening was thus meant to help make the language encountered in class more accessible and rational.

Looking back, the instructors felt other factors contributed to the success of our class coordination project. Clearly the social-emotional impact of the materials contributed to learning and thus deserves mentioning. The movie itself was emotionally very powerful, and having an African teacher enhanced the veracity and emotional impact of its content.

Conclusion and ideas for future research

Comprehension of meaningful language constitutes a basis for successful language learning. Combining narrow reading and listening in a single program promoted language development by helping vocabulary learning and cultivating background knowledge. Words were recycled in familiar contexts, which helped comprehension and acquisition. A rich context for learning induced emotional involvement. Based on our positive experience of course coordination, we suggest teachers implement narrow, specialized reading and listening activities into their teaching repertoires and educational programs.

Naturally, more quantitative and qualitative research needs to be conducted to confirm the effectiveness of narrow reading and listening. One idea is to explore the narrow output (Swain, 1995) students produce as they deeply discuss and write about particular issues in class. Since narrow input enhances comprehensibility, the more compre-

hensible the input students receive, the better the output they are likely to produce. This spoken and written output could then be analyzed to examine learner uptake, or how much language was learned via narrow reading and listening. One idea for a quantitative research experiment is to investigate how well students can recall, in an entirely new context, language learned in a previous experience of narrow reading and listening. Longitudinal studies in this area would enable investigation of retention and long-term learning outcomes. The combination of narrow reading and listening has potential for creating a fruitful feedback loop of theory, research, and practice.

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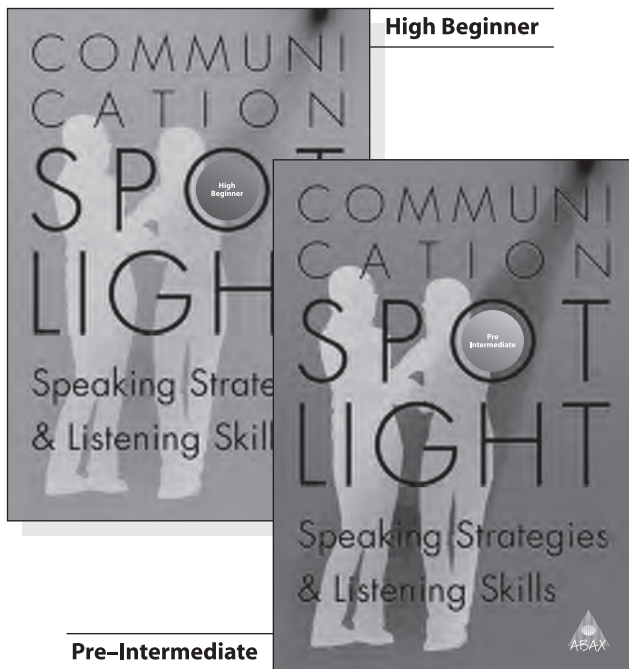

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