Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition Through Narrow Reading among Primary School Pupils

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Abstract

Vocabulary is an essential part of language learning. Vocabulary can be acquired incidentally or intentionally. In Malaysian classroom, vocabulary is mainly learnt through rote learning, where learners are drilled to remember the words through reusing the words in different tasks. Most of the time, vocabulary learning is a conscious process. On the contrary, incidental vocabulary acquisition is uncommon especially among young English as Second Language (ESL) learners. Incidental vocabulary acquisition is a process where acquisition can occur through reading and narrow reading is a useful strategy to consolidate the learning of new vocabulary. The main objective of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of narrow reading in improving incidental vocabulary acquisition among young learners in ESL context. The study involved thirty primary school pupils from a sub-urban school in Johor Bahru. Three instruments were used in this study, (i) pre- and post-tests, (ii) questionnaire, and (iii) semi-structured interview. The findings from the pre-test and post-test showed an increase in the mean of the scores. From the questionnaire, more than fifty percent of the pupils agreed that reading from thematically related texts helped them to enjoy reading and enabled them to understand the vocabulary. Findings from the semi-structured interview generated two themes, (i) self-directed learning, and (ii) motivation to read. Hence, narrow reading in the ESL classroom helps in acquiring incidental vocabulary among the pupils. It is recommended that narrow reading can be introduced in the ESL Malaysian classroom to encourage incidental vocabulary acquisition especially among young learners.

Keywords: incidental vocabulary acquisition, narrow reading, young ESL learners

Abstrak

Pembelajaran kosa kata diklasifikasikan sebagai proses asas kerana kecekapan kata mempercepat proses mendengar, bertutur, membaca dan menulis dengan berkesan. Pemerolehan kosa kata adalah sebahagian daripada pembelajaran perbendaharaan kata dan ia dapat diperoleh secara tidak sengaja atau sengaja. Pemerolehan perbendaharaan kata insidental adalah proses di mana pemerolehan berlaku terutama melalui pembacaan. Pelbagai strategi telah digunakan dan 'Narrow Reading' telah menjadi salah satu strategi yang mencukupi untuk menggabungkan pembelajaran perkataan baru ke dalam minda murid. Oleh itu, objektif utama kajian ini adalah untuk mengetahui keberkesanan *narrow reading* dalam meningkatkan pemerolehan perbendaharaan kata yang tidak disengajakan. Populasi kajian ini berasal dari salah satu sekolah rendah di Johor dan tiga puluh peserta di antara murid sekolah rendah yang terpilih untuk menjalankan kajian ini. Tiga puluh peserta dipilih untuk berada dalam kumpulan eksperimental. Dalam kajian ini, peserta kumpulan eksperimental akan didedahkan kepada teks yang bermakna daripada tema yang sama yang lebih cenderung menggunakan kata dan konstruk yang kerap, maka ia dianggap membawa kepada pemerolehan perbendaharaan kata yang tidak disengajakan. Tiga kaedah pengumpulan data yang berbeza telah dijalankan iaitu (i) ujian pra dan pasca, (ii) soal selidik dan (iii) temu bual separa berstruktur. Hasil perbandingan ujian menunjukkan peningkatan *mean* skor murid-murid. Survei mendapati bahawa lebih dari lima puluh peratus murid-murid bersetuju teks bacaan mempunyai tema yang sama menjadikan pembacaan lebih seronok dan mereka boleh memahami perbendaharaan kata yang baru. Hasil dapatan dari temu bual menunjukkan dua tema iaitu (i) pembelajaran kendiri, dan (ii) motivasi untuk membaca. Oleh itu, *narrow reading* di dalam kelas Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua membantu murid-murid untuk mempelajari kosa kata dengan tidak sengaja. Sebagai cadangan masa depan, penggunaan ujian perbendaharaan kata lain dalam mengukur ukuran perbendaharaan kata dan pengetahuan peserta dapat dipertimbangkan dalam penyelidikan masa depan. Sebagai kesimpulan, *narrow reading* boleh diperkenalkan didalam kelas Bahasa Inggeris di Malaysia untuk menggalakan peningkatan pemerolehan perbendaharaan kata yang tidak disengajakan di kalangan murid sekolah rendah.

Kata kunci: Pembelajaran kosa kata, 'Narrow reading', kalangan murid sekolah rendah

■1.0 INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is gaining a well-deserved attention in the process of acquiring English as the second language (Erlandsson & Wallgren, 2017). Formerly, grammar was pointed out to be the most paramount skill but this was disputed by Folse (2004) by stating that without using a pertinent word, communication will not occur and obviously learning will not be ensued. In order to use an appropriate word in a sentence, vocabulary acquisition plays a crucial role deliberately in developing the ability to communicate naturally. Gill (2016) claimed that Malaysian learners are still facing greater obstacles in interacting with others in second language as lexical choices is a barrier in

encouraging them to communicate effectively without any disruption. Appropriate lexical choices may be a problem to most ESL learners perhaps due to the way vocabulary is taught at school. A suitable strategy of vocabulary learning may not be implemented at school that results in learners being unsure of what vocabulary to be used. Rote learning of simply remembering the meaning of words and use them in sentences is the most common strategy of vocabulary learning in most primary schools. The findings of a study by Fung and Macaro (2019) showed that rote learning is the typical method of teaching vocabulary to ESL learners that hinders their mastery of vocabulary knowledge. Thornbury (2017) suggested that teachers have to experiment more on other strategies to aid learners to memorize words permanently. Incidental vocabulary learning is one of the strategies seldom used by ESL teachers and the study on it is rather scarce in Malaysian classroom.

Incidental vocabulary can be acquired through various strategies but one that is commonly used is narrow reading. Lu (2007) claimed that narrow reading is an effective strategy to help learners memorize words permanently. This can be done by providing learners with reading texts of the same topic or by the same author. This strategy will assist learners in acquiring vocabulary incidentally and over some time, the vocabulary will be internalized in their memory. This is because the texts of the same topic are most likely to contain similar vocabulary, and the same author may reuse the same vocabulary as well. The focus on vocabulary acquisition is rather crucial as vocabulary and reading are inseparable. In fact, the Malaysian Standard Curriculum Document and Assessment (2014) indicated that by the end of year 6, primary school students in Malaysia need to have the ability to read information independently. This reading assessment also involve knowing the vocabulary in the texts. Hence, it is vital for the learners to learn the vocabulary through reading because elaborated that knowledge of vocabulary and structure will only be increased through extensive or narrow reading (Ro & Cheng, 2014). Thus, this research is aimed to answer three research questions, (1) Does narrow reading improve incidental vocabulary acquisition among primary school pupils? (2) What are primary school pupils' perceptions towards narrow reading in improving their incidental vocabulary acquisition? and (3) To what extent narrow reading is beneficial in acquiring incidental vocabulary among Malaysian primary school pupils?

■2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Schmitt (1997) defined vocabulary as a set of properties which combines the meaning, association, collocation, register, grammatical behaviour, spelling, frequency, and pronunciation to master the word knowledge. Vocabulary is claimed as the basis of language proficiency (Richards & Renandya, 2012. Further definition stated that vocabulary is the knowledge of words and the meanings hidden behind the words (Alqahtani, 2015). Hence, vocabulary is considered to be the foundation of not only knowing the meaning of words but other aspects connecting to the words, which later aids the learners to speak, listen, read and write in the first or second language.

In the context of ESL classroom teaching, vocabulary is commonly taught as part of a reading activity. Learners are usually asked to look up the meaning of words as they appear in the reading text. Proceeding activities include using the learnt words in filling in the blanks to complete sentences or constructing own sentences. However, it is worth highlighting that there are other strategies of vocabulary learning and acquiring which may not be adopted by ESL teachers. Incidental vocabulary acquisition is one of the strategies where vocabulary can be acquired incidentally through communication or indirect exposure of words in explicit instruction and word-learning strategies (Izzah, 2015). Rott (2012) defined this as a type of vocabulary learning process, which generally involves picking up new words when learners participated in the reading, listening, speaking and writing task. This shows that learners can learn words incidentally in any situation as implicit vocabulary learning underlies in an environment where the process takes place naturally (Ellis, 1992). Nagy, Herman and Anderson (1985) indicated that a single incidental word will not lead to the understanding the word's meaning but learning the word's meaning from a context will aid the ESL learners to learn the words and their meanings without the assistance of a dictionary. This shows that words that learners come across several times incidentally in a text will help them acquire the meaning of those words. As a result, learners are able to comprehend the text (Baumann, Kame'enui & Ash, 2003). Hence, by exposing learners to texts of the same themes, they are expected to acquire the vocabulary and its meaning.

Shujing and Xie (2007) argued that incidental vocabulary learning is a central point in most research study because vocabulary items in a specific textbook are not adequate. As a result, teachers resorted to implement incidental vocabulary learning in a foreign classroom. There are various methods to carry out incidental vocabulary learning, but teachers need to choose the most appropriate and suitable strategy to improve the level of vocabulary acquisition of the learners. One strategy to achieve this aim will be narrow reading. Lewis (2012) claimed that second language learners read various types of texts which are organized in different writing styles and used distinct vocabulary. However, those learners eventually face difficulties in understanding the texts as different words are being used in different contexts which may have different meanings. This further creates confusion among ESL learners. Hence, Krashen (1989) suggested that ESL learners who want to learn words incidentally should read texts from the same contexts and genres or from the same author as similar words will be repeated. This will make the learners acquire both the sentence structure and vocabulary easily.

Brown, Waring and Donkaewbua (2008) suggested that a second language learner will be able to learn new words incidentally through different ways, such as reading, reading while listening and listening to stories. They also strongly highlighted a key point by pointing out that there is a positive correlation between incidental vocabulary learning and narrow reading compared to reading while listening and listening to stories. Liu and Todd (2014) highlighted that the incidental vocabulary acquisition will increase through narrow reading and eventually the language development among the second language learners will improve. Milton (2009) further emphasized that expository texts are effective to be used for narrow reading in inspiring the learners to read and improve their vocabulary acquisition. Expository texts are texts which the topics are similar (Min, 2008). The positive effect of this strategy was found among students' vocabulary acquisition in which their acquisition in vocabulary increased in terms of spelling, word meaning and word production. Thus, this current research investigated the use of narrow reading using expository texts in incidental vocabulary acquisition among primary pupils in an ESL Malaysian classroom.

■3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-method design where it focuses on both qualitative and quantitative methods. Experimental design was used as it allows the researcher to find the causal relationship between narrow reading and the incidental vocabulary acquisition. The study used a purposive sampling where the population suits the set of criteria set by the researchers. This study was conducted among Malaysian primary school pupils in a sub-urban school in the state of Johor. The total population of the higher primary pupils (Year 4 - 6) in this school are 375. The pupils from this school are classified into three different levels such as upper intermediate, intermediate and lower intermediate. There are four classes in year 4, three classes in year 5 and four classes in year 6. This study used random sampling in selecting 120 participants from the 375 pupils. Krejcie and Morgan (1970) suggested that 30% of the total population should be chosen as the sample for a study. There should be about 113 samples if the total population in 380. Hence, choosing 120 pupils as initial samples is an appropriate number. In order to homogenize and categorize the participants into the same proficiency level, the Vocabulary Placement Test had been conducted among the 120 pupils. After calculating the total vocabulary size of the participants, only 30 pupils were included in the study. These 30 pupils were the ones who have the knowledge of 2000–3000-word families.

This study collected both quantitative and qualitative data. Pre- and post-test, as well as questionnaire were used to collect the quantitative data, while semi-structured interview was used to gather the qualitative data. The three data set are designed to enable data triangulation. The pre-test and post-test contained eight questions which were divided into three parts; the multiple-choice questions, the open-ended questions and also the section where the participants write the meanings of the words from the context given. Each question was given one mark and the total score of the questions were eight. After the administration of the post-test, the questionnaire was distributed. The five-point Likert scales questionnaire containing 5 questions was distributed to the 30 participants in the experimental group. The questionnaire was adapted from Daly and Miller's apprehension questionnaire (1975). Then, ten pupils from the experimental group were chosen as participants for the semi-structured interview. There were eight questions prepared for the interview. From this semi structured interview, the interviewees' perception towards narrow reading in acquiring incidental vocabulary was audio-recorded. The audio recording was later transcribed and the transcription was analysed using thematic analysis.

■4.0 RESULTS

RQ1: Does Narrow Reading Improve Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition Among Primary School Pupils?

After the pre-test and post-test were marked and analysed, the result was tabulated and converted into a bar graph to show the difference in marks. Then, the scores were put into Statistical Package for the Social Science Software (SPSS) to obtain the descriptive analysis and T-test. Two different statistics analysis were used to analyse the scores. Figure 1 shows the analysis of pre-test and post-test of the experimental group, while Figure 2 shows the mean and standard deviation, and finally Figure 3 indicates the result of t-test.
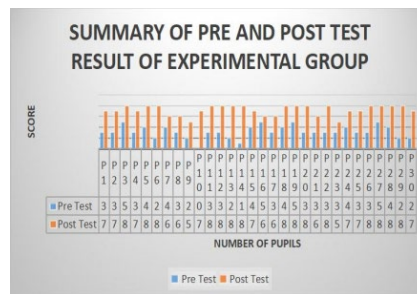

Figure 1 Analysis of pre-test and post-test of Experimental Group

The highest score gained in pre-test was 5 (P3, P16, P19 and P27) while the lowest was 0 (P10). Generally, it can be said that most pupils faced difficulty in understanding the vocabulary used in the text. After four weeks of treatment that exposed students to narrow reading, the post-test was administered and the result can be seen in Figure 1. It is shown that all pupils obtained an increase in marks for their pre-test. The highest increase was seven marks obtained by P10. Overall, the increase of marks ranges from two to seven marks in comparison between the pre-test and post-test.
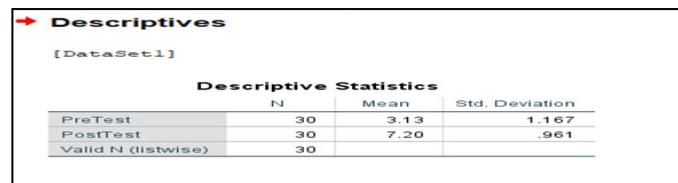

Figure 2 Descriptive statistics of pre- and post-test scores

Figure 2 shows the descriptive analysis of pre-test and post-test. The overall mean score for the pre-test is 3.13. This shows that the mean score is low. This is because there was a pupil who got only 0 for the pre-test. The pupil could not understand the text because the words used in the texts could be too challenging for him or her. In comparison to the post-test, the overall mean is higher with 7.20. This shows that there is improvement in marks between the pre-test and post-test after the treatment of narrow reading.
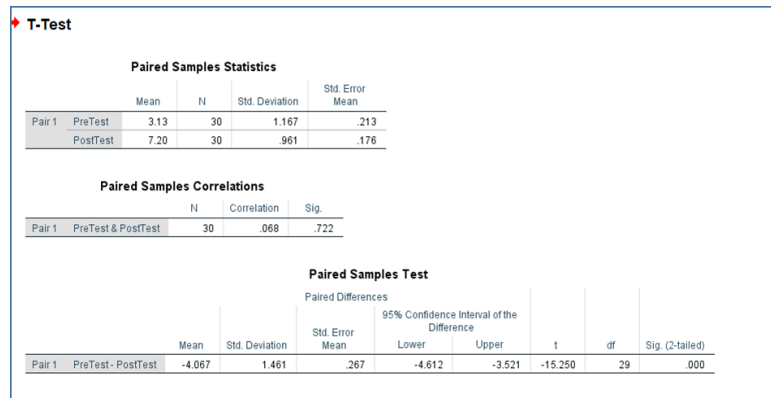

Figure 3 Paired T-test of pre and post test scores

The next test used in determining the mean difference between the pre-test and post-test score is the T-test as shown in Figure 3. The significant two tailed shows 0.000 and this means that the null hypothesis assumes that the data is more consistent as there is a true mean difference between the paired samples which are the pre-test and post-test scores. Hence, the analysis of pre-test and post-test has answered the first research question and it can be concluded that the implementation of narrow readings strategy assists the learners to improve their incidental vocabulary acquisition.

RQ2: What are primary school pupils' perceptions towards narrow reading in improving their incidental vocabulary acquisition?

The questionnaire was distributed to the pupils in the experimental group and they were requested to give their feedback of using narrow reading in increasing their incidental vocabulary acquisition. Based on the Likert scale, the feedback from the pupils were recorded and shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Pupils' Perceptions Towards Narrow Reading

Items	Likert Scales				
	1 (Strongly Disagree)	2 (Disagree)	3 (Partially Agree)	4 (Agree)	5 (Strongly Agree)
1. I was able to improve my vocabulary through reading texts from the same topic called Butterfly.	-	-	10%	53.3%	36.6%
2. I was able to understand the texts given.	-	-	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%
3. I was able to guess the meanings of the words from the text given.	-	-	50%	43.3%	6.6%
4. I enjoyed reading the same topic of Butterfly but in different contexts.	-	-	6.6%	43.3%	50%
5. I can remember words easily by using narrow reading as the strategy.	-	-	23.3%	20%	56.6%

For the item 1, 53.3 percent (16 pupils) agreed to the statement. This shows that more than half of the pupils agreed that they were able to increase their vocabulary through reading thematically related texts. Item 2 in the questionnaire showed equal percentage of 33.3 percent of the pupils chose partially agree, agree and strongly agree. However, it can be highlighted that more than 50 percent (20 pupils) agreed that they were able to understand the texts given. Hence, it is acceptable to claim that narrow reading strategy does assist them in acquiring vocabulary incidentally.

For item 3, 50 percent (15 pupils) partially agreed to the fact that they were able to guess the meanings of the words from the three texts given to them. It can be observed that the learners were still having minor issues in finding the meaning of the words and answering the questions given to them. On the contrary, another 50 percent stated that they agreed that they were able to guess the meaning of the words. This shows that exposing learners to texts from the same genre helped them to guess the meaning as some of the words were recurring.

Fifty percent of the pupils strongly agreed to the statement in item 4 that they enjoyed reading the same topic in different context. This can be due to the fun learning that they experienced during the treatment, whereby narrow reading strategy was adopted. When pupils

were able to understand the reading text, reading can be enjoyable. The narrow reading strategy assisted them to acquire the vocabulary as the same words were being repeated in the texts from different context.

For the last item in the questionnaire, 56.6 percent (17 pupils) stated that they strongly agreed with the statement. This percentage shows that more than half of the pupils were able to remember the words used in the context easily because of the strategy used. It can be concluded that through utilizing narrow reading strategy, the level two primary pupils were able to acquire vocabulary incidentally. Eventually, this helps them to improve their score in the post-test.

RQ3: To What Extent Narrow Reading Is Beneficial In Acquiring Incidental Vocabulary Among Malaysian Primary School Pupils?

A semi-structured interview was carried out with ten selected participants in order to probe further on how narrow reading works in increasing their incidental vocabulary acquisition. Three different themes were coded from the semi-structured interview which were (i) learners' autonomy, (ii) fun learning and (iii) motivation. All the ten selected pupils gave positive response on the implementation of narrow reading in increasing the learners' incidental vocabulary acquisition. This response showed how well the learners had engaged themselves in reading the texts given to them by understanding and remembering the topic-focused vocabulary.

The first theme is self-directed. Narrow reading allows the learners to be autonomous as they are accepting the responsibility to learn or read the thematically related texts given to them. During the interview session, participant 5 said, "It was really nice to read the texts all by myself without the teacher's guidance. I even learn new words, teacher." This shows how the pupil engaged himself or herself in reading the texts without the guidance of the teacher in or out of the classroom. The pupil had empowered his or her learning by becoming an autonomous learner.

The second theme coded is motivation to read/learn. The pupils claimed that they enjoyed reading thematically related texts. Participant 10 said, "I don't like reading actually but now I love it because I could learn more new vocabulary". This shows that the pupils lack interest in reading, but once thematically related texts were given to them, they found it easy to gain new vocabulary in a productive way. As they keep seeing similar words occurring in the texts, they were able to guess the meaning. Participant 1 and 2 shared the same view, "The texts motivated me to read more, teacher". This in turn make them develop the love for reading as reading becomes easier. Hence, based on the findings of the semi-structured interview, it can be claimed that narrow reading is beneficial in increasing pupils' vocabulary acquisition. The fact that they were exposed to texts that are thematically related made them motivated to read more as reading becomes more fun.

■ **5.0 DISCUSSION**

As reported earlier, based on the pre-test and post-test score, there is an increase in the vocabulary test. This indicates that the treatment of narrow reading helps in incidental vocabulary acquisition. The thematically related texts that were exposed to pupils assist in acquiring vocabulary as the words are recurring and they acquire the vocabulary unconsciously. This is supported by Kang (2015) that students who read thematically related texts (narrow reading) acquire more productive vocabulary then reading thematically unrelated texts (wide reading). Therefore, it is beneficial to expose the pupils to the texts which are similar in themes as this will increase their incidental vocabulary acquisition.

The finding for research question 1 is fully supported by the data from the questionnaire that was distributed. The analysis shows that most of the pupils agreed that narrow reading assists them in improving their vocabulary, enable them to comprehend a text, promotes fun learning environment and it also helps them to remember the words easily. However, it is interesting to note that fifty percent of the pupils agreed partially to the statement that they were able to guess the meaning of the words from the text given. It is important to highlight that this is based on the pupils' perception but the result of the post-test proved otherwise. Perhaps there are some vocabularies that are a bit challenging for these pupils, hence they could not guess the meaning of the words. On the other hand, pupils reported that they could easily remember the words through narrow reading. This is aligned with the study by Arias (2003) that repeated exposure to new words is crucial in storing the words in the long-term memory of the learners and this can be done through narrow reading. As the vocabulary is being repeated in the thematically related texts, pupils were able to acquire and remember those words.

Based on the findings of the semi-structured interview, two themes were generated, (i) self-directed, and (ii) motivation to read/learn. Although the texts were prepared by the teacher, the pupils felt that they were empowered to take full responsibility of their own learning. This was evident through the tasks that they had to complete during the treatment. Self-directed learning promotes the learners' autonomy through freedom of learning, belonging of the learning's responsibilities, and flexibility of learning among the learners (Wu, Gruppuso & Adashi, 2021). The pupils can manage one's own learning, adding that this skill is not naturally occurring in learners but can be obtained 'naturally' or through formal learning (Haddad, 2016). Hence, narrow reading provides the opportunity for the pupils to practice self-directed learning. This is further supported by Landau (2001) who reported that pupils in a classroom should construct their own learning actively to enable them to enjoy learning. Through showing their own initiative in learning, the pupils will be able to explore and self-reflect on what they have learnt earlier (Lea, Stephenson & Troy, 2003). Besides that, pupils highlighted that narrow reading motivated them to enjoy reading and eventually encourage them to read more. Avila (2015) concurred that motivation will influence the improvement of students' English skills through reading English texts. The finding on motivation to read is aligned with the research by Horst, Cobb and Meara (1998) that reading plays a vital role in increasing learner's vocabulary. Thornbury (2002) also agreed that when learners love reading, they may also achieve an autonomy and reading assists them in having pleasure to learn. Krashen, Han and Cho (1994) highlighted that one of main aims of narrow reading strategy is improving the language ability and boosting the reading motivation among the learners. Motivation is a crucial factor in reading, which eventually leads to reading achievement (Morgan & Fusch, 2007). Renandya, Krashen and Jacobs (2018) also mentioned that reading thematically related texts will eventually aid the learners to read confidently and this will encourage them to read more. Thus, it can be concluded that narrow reading helps the pupils to improve incidental vocabulary acquisition.

The findings of this study have significant contribution to the classroom teaching, and there are some recommendations especially for the teaching of vocabulary in ESL context. The first recommendation is the vocabulary tests can be varied according to the proficiency level of the learners. Not only the vocabulary list should cater to the learners' proficiency but the types of vocabulary test can be diverse as well, for example, apart from multiple-choice questions, others that can be included are short answer, matching, sentence construction and crossword puzzle. The second recommendation is to use different kinds of stories from different genres, such as humour, suspense, and adventure. These genres may invoke different interest in pupils especially those in primary school. Thus, it could generate similar or different findings if research to be conducted using these genres.

■6.0 CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that narrow reading plays a vital role in improving an individual learner's incidental vocabulary acquisition. By exposing the learners with texts that are thematically related, similar vocabularies are recurring, making reading easier. This is because learners are able to guess the meaning of those words and eventually understand the texts. This in turn promotes the joy of reading and make learners want to read more. When learners are given the full freedom to take responsibility for their own learning, they have applied self-directed learning without realizing it. Since reading is a challenge to be implemented among primary school pupils, narrow reading of the texts with the same themes may be of a great assistance. Acquiring incidental vocabulary through narrow reading is therefore a possible strategy to inculcate the love of reading, as well as understanding the vocabulary. Hence, narrow reading has to be implemented or integrated in designing lesson plans in order to encourage the learners in ESL classroom in Malaysia to read.

Acknowledgement

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