

The Impact of Narrow Reading on the Receptive Vocabulary Knowledge of Moroccan High School Students

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Recent research on English as a foreign language (EFL) vocabulary instruction has surged due to its inherent importance and the challenge it poses, given the vast number of words in languages. Many studies explored how reading enhances EFL students' vocabulary. However, empirical studies on how narrow reading aids beginners' vocabulary growth are lacking. Hence, this study purports to investigate the impact of narrow reading on the development of Moroccan EFL students' receptive vocabulary knowledge. An experimental pretest post-test design is adopted. 75 10th grade (common core) beginner students belonging to three groups participated in the study. The first experimental group read 4 texts on the same theme and written by the same author. The second experimental group read 4 texts written by the same author. The control group read 4 texts written by different authors on different themes. Meara's yes/no test was used to measure the participants' receptive vocabulary knowledge before the treatment. The treatment lasted seven weeks. The vocabulary knowledge scale (VKS) was used to measure students' receptive vocabulary gains. The results of a one-way ANOVA showed that the group which read texts on the same theme and by the same author outperformed the other groups. Informal discussion with the participants unveiled some factors that have eased vocabulary uptake.

Keywords: EFL, Arab students, receptive Vocabulary, vocabulary development, narrow reading

INTRODUCTION

Learning vocabulary has recently become a major concern in the EFL research classroom. This stems from the belief that vocabulary is the hub of communicating and conveying meaningful messages in languages (Çinar & Ari, 2019; Paribakht & Wesche, 1997; Rajayi & Maleki, 2023; Read, 2000; Schmitt, 2008; Schmitt et al., 2017; Webb & Nation, 2017). In the Moroccan context, many studies have been conducted in order to measure the receptive vocabulary knowledge of Moroccan students. For example, Agrram (2020) discovered that EFL master's students exhibit proficiency in approximately 1400 word families, as evidenced by the outcomes of Meara's (2010) yes/no test. On the same vein, Harraqi (2017) reported that 11th grade, which is one grade above the participants of the present study, students don't master any of the 5 vocabulary levels tested using the updated vocabulary level test (Webb et al., 2017). Harraqi added that such results demonstrate a considerable lack in the receptive vocabulary knowledge of Moroccan students.

As a rule of thumb, learning a word from the first encounter is believed to be out of reach for most students considering the incremental nature of acquiring vocabulary (Webb & Nation, 2017). Schmitt et al. (2017) explained that students need to meet a word at least 10 times before it is learned which

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makes extensive reading one of the most suitable approaches teachers can adopt to develop vocabulary. Webb and Nation (2017) added that teachers can adopt narrow reading as a strategy to develop comprehension, reduce learning the burden, and augment the chances of repeated encounters of lexis.

Narrow reading, as the name suggests, means limiting the authors, themes, and vocabulary of the chosen reading texts. In this sense, narrow reading is considered as a part of extensive reading because it engages students in reading many texts written by one author or dealing with one theme (Bryan, 2011; Chang & Renandya, 2021). Also, Narrow reading offers clear benefits by enhancing the reading speed of students through a top-down approach, facilitated by familiar themes in consecutive texts. This approach is found to reduce the cognitive load of vocabulary learning since key vocabulary reoccurs throughout the texts, enabling students to encounter target language items in various contexts (Chang & Renandya, 2021; Nation & Hunston, 2013).

While narrow reading is advocated as an effective vocabulary development tool (Cho & Krashen, 1994), its impact on Arab students' receptive vocabulary remains largely unexplored. Particularly in the Moroccan EFL classroom, where theme-based texts dominate, the lack of interconnectedness between these texts poses a challenge. With students dealing with 10 different units annually, opportunities to engage with familiar topics and encounter target vocabulary in varied contexts are limited. In this regard, VanPatten (2004) explained that students find it challenging to process meaning and linguistic forms at the same time while receiving input. Schmidt (1990) added that students learning does not take place if students fail to notice target language. Thus, this study addresses the urgent need to investigate the influence of narrow reading on the development of Moroccan EFL receptive vocabulary. Its findings aim to guide Moroccan EFL educators in enhancing vocabulary instruction practices.

Literature Review

Narrow Reading and Vocabulary Learning

Narrow reading refers to “reading only in one genre, one subject matter, or the work of one author” (Cho et al., 2005, p. 58). The authors explained that the idea behind narrow reading stems from providing enough context across different texts which increases the chances of incidental learning. By the same token, Gardner (2008) stated that a collection of texts written by one author is more likely to contain recurrent words or expressions than when such text collections are written by more than one author. In the same vein, texts written on the same theme tend to provide readers with higher chances of re-encountering vocabulary through the different texts (Min & Hsu, 2008). Literature on vocabulary learning has highlighted these repeated encounters as one of the main factors leading to successful vocabulary learning (Nation, 1997; Peters et al., 2009). Nation (1997) explained that students tend to forget words because of a lack of reinforcement in subsequent meetings. In contrast to several research studies such as (Eckerth & Tavakili, 2012; Laufer & Rozovski-Roitblat, 2011) that altered written content to increase the frequency of specific vocabulary words, narrow reading preserves the authenticity of texts while improving the likelihood of acquiring new vocabulary. Texts of this nature are more likely to increase the interest of students (Hosseini et al., 2017) since they feel that they are dealing with a language that is used in real life (Berardo, 2006). It is, however, cautioned that careful considerations such as text difficulty be considered before opting for authentic texts as they may decrease students' motivation (Harmer, 2001; Krashen, 1992).

Increasing repeated encounters with key vocabulary can be achieved through adopting different approaches (Schmitt & Carter, 2000). Schmitt and Carter (2000) illustrated that one way to incorporate narrow reading in the classroom is by encouraging students to read a “running story” like the tragic death of princess Diana. The text about this tragic incident is likely to contain recurring content words like “police”, “princess”, “death”, “crash”, “photographers”, “people”, or “union”. Also,

the reading texts may follow a sequencing of events which may help readers approach the texts using a top-down approach. Table 1 summarizes a series of stories the story of princess Diana may follow.

Table 1
Series of stories on the same theme

Day	Diana stories	Occurrence in all series
Sunday	Diana dies	Police (23)
Monday	Body returned; mourning	Princess (53)
Tuesday	Driver was drunk; mourning	Death (26)
Wednesday	Paparazzi as suspect	Crash (26)
Thursday	Royal family panned for mourning style	Photographer (30)
Friday	No story	People (21)
Saturday	Queens speech	Union (28)
Sunday	Funeral	

Source: Adapted from Schmitt and Carter (2000)

Besides increasing the chances of meeting target vocabulary in different contexts, narrow reading helps expand readers' schemata and, therefore, mean ideas which leads to better comprehension (Chang & Renandya, 2020; Ma, 2021). Schmidt (1990) added that learning a language takes place only when attention and recognition of linguistic features takes place. By expanding the readers' background knowledge on the topic, narrow reading results in deeper processing of unknown words (Chang & Renandya, 2020).

Previous Studies

Early research on narrow reading focused exclusively on corpus (Kang, 2015). For instance, Schmitt and Carter (2000) analysed a series of texts appearing in different newspapers. The researchers concluded that related stories in the analysed newspapers offered more repetitions of vocabulary than unrelated content. Likewise, Gardner (2004) concentrated on storytelling literature, whereas Rodgers and Webb (2011) examined television shows and arrived at findings similar to those from Schmitt and Carter (2000). Nonetheless, these outcomes required empirical validation.

One of the earliest empirical studies regarding the impact of narrow reading was conducted by Cho and Krashen (1994). The participants read as much as they could from a graded readers series for pleasure. According to the findings, the participants were able to achieve advanced proficiency levels because of their familiarity with the writing style and their ability to easily comprehend the texts. This was facilitated by their development of schemata and the expansion of their background knowledge through exposure to the stories. Besides, an average score of 68% on meaning recall was found. Another study by Cho et al. (2005) with younger participants confirmed the results from Cho and Krashen (1994).

Kang (2015) conducted a recent empirical study involving 61 Korean intermediate-level students, comprising one experimental group and one control group. Both groups began by reading the same text, but the target words were enhanced with glosses. Subsequently, the experimental group read 3 more texts on the same theme while the control group read three more unrelated texts. The researcher observed no significant differences before the treatment between the two groups. The study's results indicated that the narrow reading group outperformed the control group in both isolated and contextual assessments of the 15 target words. Another study was carried out by Chang and Renandya (2021) to explore the effects of narrow reading on four aspects of vocabulary: meaning recognition, recall, source, and usage. The study involved thirty-two college students who had studied English for a minimum of 10 years. The participants were divided into four groups: same author, same theme, same title, and random texts in a different order. The results revealed that reading texts written by one author and random texts led to significantly greater improvements in vocabulary compared to texts with the same title. However, there were no noticeable differences between texts from the same author, same theme, and random text.

Although the above studies provide interesting results regarding how narrow reading affects vocabulary development in different contexts, the topic remains under-researched not only in the Arab world but also with beginner EFL students. To fill in this gap, the present study seeks to investigate the effect of narrow reading on EFL beginners whose mother tongue is Arabic. The current research endeavours to answer two research questions:

- 1) Does reading different text types affect Moroccan high school EFL students' receptive vocabulary knowledge?
- 2) Which type of reading texts has more influence on the receptive vocabulary knowledge of Moroccan high school EFL students?

METHOD

Participants

The participants of the present study were 75 students belonging to three groups. Their ages were between 14 and 18 years old. The participants started studying English as a Foreign Language last year for two hours a week. All the participants spoke Arabic as their mother tongue. This shared starting point helped ensure common linguistic and social background of the participants. Figure 1 summarizes other characteristics of the participants regarding the gender. It is worth noting that none of the participants had any other experience regarding learning English apart from the two hours a week they had last year.

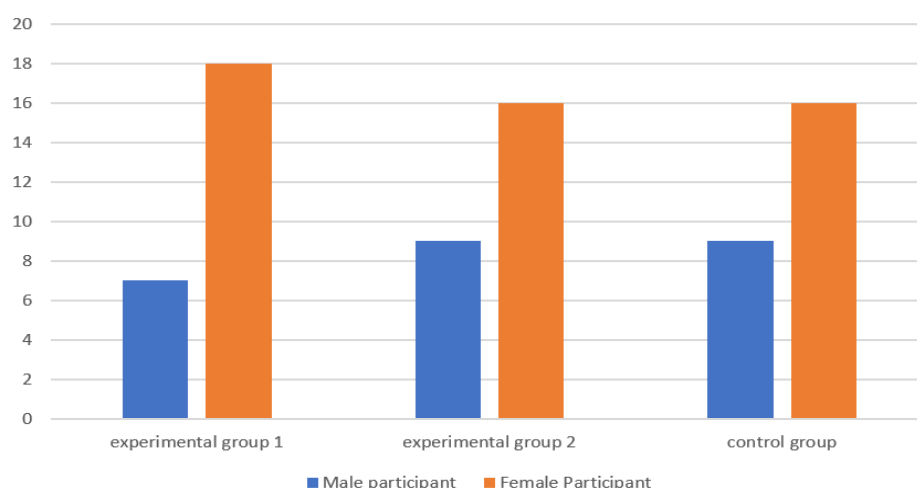


Figure 1
Characteristics of the participants

To ensure the suitability of the reading materials, the participants took Meara (2010) vocabulary size test. The results showed that the participants were not yet familiar with the first 1000 scoring 52.27% ($M=23$). As shown in table 2, the Levene's test revealed a non-significant result ($F(2, 72) = 0.045, p = .956$) indicating that the assumption of equal variances across groups was met.

Table 2

Assessment of homogeneity across groups

Levene statistics	df	df2	Sig.
.045	2	72	.956

Reading materials

The main text that the three conditions read was adopted from *Reading for Speed and Fluency* by Paul Nation and Casey Malarcher (2007). The text was chosen mainly because the theme was believed to be appropriate for students based on their scores on Meara’s test (2010), and unfamiliar due to their previous experience with learning English. The text was about how to learn about *Groups of Animals*. 18 words were chosen from this text as target vocabulary items. The supplementary texts read by the first experimental groups were on the same theme dealing with *Elephants, Penguins, and Kinds of Animals* while the second experimental group read texts by the same author about *Reading Books, Far Away Friends, and The Power of Music*. The control group read three unrelated texts entitled *The Living Room, Lily’s Town, and Nocturnal Animals*. Table 2 provides a summary of the reading materials.

Table 2
Reading texts token, types, and frequency range

Group		Text	Tokens	Types	Level 1	Level 2
Experimental group 1	1.	Groups of Animals	299	134	97.32%	2.34%
	2.	Elephants	295	139	86.44%	10.85%
	3.	Penguins	301	131	81.40%	10.63
	4.	Kinds of Animals	298	118	86.58	3.36
Experimental group 2	1.	Groups of Animals	299	134	97.32%	2.34%
	2.	Reading books	297	132	98.32%	0.00
	3.	Far Away Friends	305	115	94.75%	0.66
	4.	The Power of Music	218	106	87.16%	9.63
Control group	1.	Groups of Animals	299	134	97.32%	2.34%
	2.	The living room	218	65	78.90%	6.88%
	3.	Lily’s town	270	132	80.74%	7.04%
	4.	Nocturnal Animals				

Target Words

Eighteen target vocabulary items were selected from the main text as shown in table 2. The words were chosen based on the results of a piloting study with a sample of 15 students from the participants of the present study whom the researcher asked to read the main text and highlight all the words they do not know. Based on their answers, the researcher chose 18 target words of which sixteen were within the first 1K according to Cobb’s (2014) frequency vocabulary profiler, and two were within the 2k. Table 3 below provides the target vocabulary items, their frequency as well as their occurrences for each group.

Instruments

To measure the extent to which the participants have developed their knowledge of the target words, the present study uses an adapted form of the vocabulary knowledge scale (VKS) developed by Paribakht and Wesche (1997). The test employs a rating system with five levels, incorporating both subjective responses and practical tasks, to capture individuals' own assessment and practical demonstration of their familiarity with particular words when written. The first level represents complete unfamiliarity while the fifth level represents the proficiency to use the word correctly in a grammatically and semantically accurate sentence.

The participants were presented with the 18 target vocabulary items and were asked to complete an immediate post-test in accordance with the VKS as in table 4 below. The participants are accorded 1 or 2 points for every correct answer.

Table 3
Target vocabulary items, their frequency, and occurrences

Target language item	Frequency	Occurrences		
		EG1	EG2	CG
1. see	K1	5	4	5
2. same	K1	3	5	4
3. different	K1	5	7	4
4. belong	K1	2	2	2
5. include	K1	1	1	1
6. monkey	K2	1	1	1
7. interesting	K1	2	3	1
8. fly	K1	4	1	1
9. care	K1	1	2	1
10. plant	K1	6	5	5
11. live	K1	12	5	2
12. enough	K1	1	1	1
13. shape	K1	1	1	1
14. safe	K1	1	1	1
15. ground	K1	2	2	2
16. smell	K2	1	1	2
17. protect	K1	2	1	1
18. hard	K1	1	2	1

Table 4
VKS elicitation scale- self-report categories

I. I don't remember having seen this word before.	لم أرى هذه الكلمة من قبل
II. I have seen this word before, but I don't know what it means.	رأيت هذه الكلمة من قبل لكن لا أعرف معناها
III. I have seen this word before, and I know what it means	رأيت هذه الكلمة من قبل وأعرف معناها

Source: Adapted from Paribakht and Wesche (1997)

Marking

The scoring of the data collected was straightforward. Adhering to Paribakht and Wesche's (1997) recommendations, one point was awarded for every correct answer. In the present study, however, item (I) was awarded 0 point because it reflects total unfamiliarity with the target words. Items II and III are awarded 1 and 2 points respectively.

Procedure

Four weeks before the treatment, the participants took Meara (2010) vocabulary size test to measure their receptive vocabulary knowledge. Based on the results of the test, twelve texts were chosen. The researcher then randomly selected 15 participants and asked them to read the main text quickly and highlight words they did not know without having to answer any questions. After four weeks, students read the first main text, which was about groups of animals, and answered reading comprehension questions. The comprehension questions were used to give meaning to the participants' reading of the texts. One week after, the first experimental group (n=25) read the second text on the same theme and by the same author, the second experimental group (n=25) read the second text by the same author, and the control group (n=25) read the second text in a session that lasted one hour. After one week, the participants followed the same procedure for the third text. After another week, the same procedure was followed with the fourth text. After reading the last text, the participants took the VKS

as an immediate surprise post-test and had a follow up discussion. The participants were not forewarned that they would take a vocabulary test. Figure 1 summarizes the procedure.

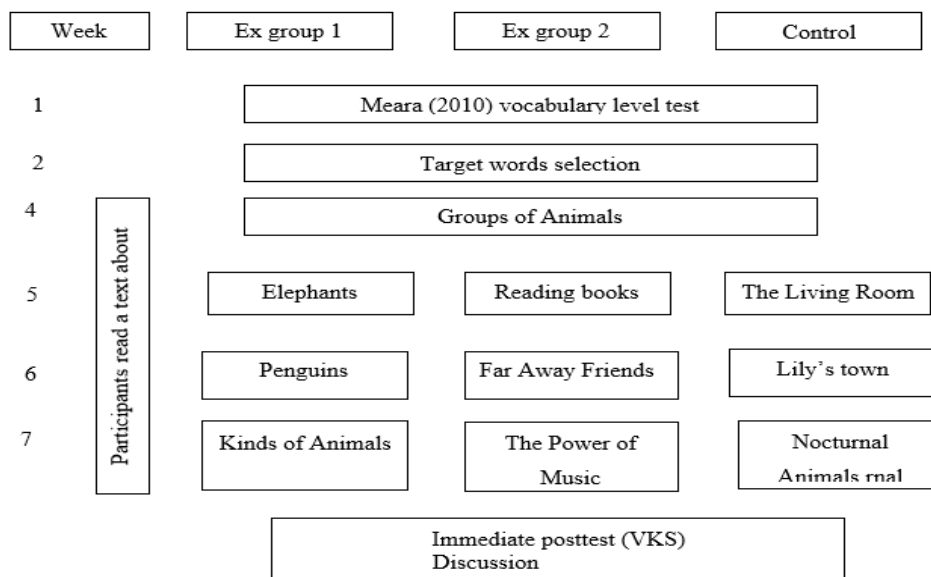


Figure 2
The procedure of the study

FINDINGS

The first research question sought to investigate whether different types of reading, namely unrelated texts, texts written by the same author and on the same theme, and texts written by the same author, have any effect on Moroccan EFL students’ receptive vocabulary knowledge. The independent variable was text types while the dependent variable was the receptive vocabulary knowledge. When significant results were found, Tukey’s post-hoc was conducted to determine which group’s mean is significantly different from the others. The results of one-way ANOVA for receptive knowledge are presented in table 5.

Table 5

ANOVA for receptive vocabulary recognition

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	360.427	2	180.213	6.871	.002
Within Groups	1888.320	72	26.227		
Total	2248.747	74			

The results of the analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant difference among the three conditions investigated. The ANOVA yielded a significant *F*-value of 6.871 (*p* = 0.002), indicating that there are statistically significant variations between the groups. Considering these findings, further investigation was warranted to explore the specific group differences in detail. To accomplish this, a Tukey post-hoc analysis was conducted to compare pairs of groups and identify which specific groups exhibited statistically significant differences from one another. By employing the Tukey post-hoc test, we aimed to gain deeper insights into the nature and extent of the observed differences and enhance our understanding of the relationships or effects present in the data. Table 6 presents Tukey post-hoc multiple comparisons.

Table 6
Tukey's honestly significant difference (HSD) Post-Hoc Test: Group comparisons and significance levels

(I) Groups	(J) Groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Same Author	Same Author and Same Theme	-1.440	1.448	.583	-4.91	2.03
	Unrelated Texts	3.760*	1.448	.030	.29	7.23
Same Author and Same Theme	Same Author	1.440	1.448	.583	-2.03	4.91
	Unrelated Texts	5.200*	1.448	.002	1.73	8.67
Unrelated Texts	Same Author	-3.760*	1.448	.030	-7.23	-.29
	Same Author and Same Theme	-5.200*	1.448	.002	-8.67	-1.73

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

The results of the Tukey post hoc test revealed significant differences in scores among the three groups: Same Author, Same Author and Same Theme, and Unrelated Texts. Comparing the groups, the Same Author and Same Theme group demonstrated the highest mean score ($M = 29.72$), slightly outperforming both the Same Author group ($M = 28.28$, $p = .583$), but significantly outperforming the Unrelated Texts group ($M = 24.52$, $p = .002$). Additionally, the Unrelated Texts group also exhibited significantly lower scores than the Same Author group ($M = 28.28$, $p = .030$). In other words, the observed mean difference was not statistically significant (mean difference = -1.440 , $p = 0.583$) when comparing texts by the same author and on the same theme with texts written by the same author. This indicates that both conditions contribute similarly to the receptive vocabulary knowledge of the students. Conversely, significant differences emerged when comparing texts by the same author to those by unrelated authors. In this regard, a statistically significant disparity in mean scores was evident (mean difference = 3.760 , $p = 0.030$), indicating that texts by the same author yield measurably different outcomes compared to those by different authors. Figure 2 shows the results in a more conspicuous manner.

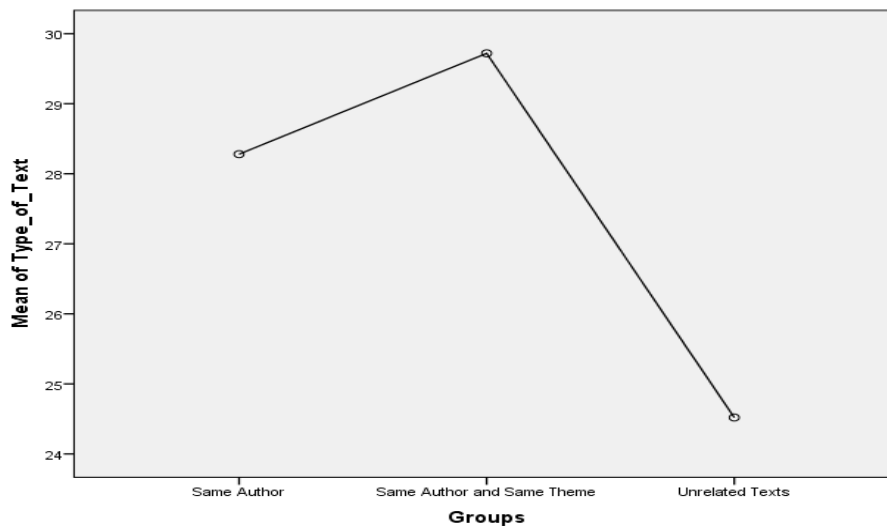


Figure 2
The differences among text types

DISCUSSION

The first research question in this paper sought to investigate the effect of different types of reading on Moroccan high school EFL students' receptive vocabulary gain. To answer this question, comparisons between the means of the three conditions were made. The results from the VKS showed that all text types contributed to the participants' receptive vocabulary knowledge. The results support extant literature on the positive effect of extensive reading on receptive vocabulary development since two activities namely reading and vocabulary learning take place simultaneously (Huckin & Coady, 1999; Schmitt, 2008).

Besides highlighting the importance of reading to improve the receptive vocabulary knowledge of the students, the results also stress the importance of choosing texts that are comprehensible for the students (Krashen 1989; Nation, 2001). For instance, the first text from which the target vocabulary items were drawn and that all students read in this study contained 97.32% of words that fall within the first thousand most frequent words which increases chances of comprehensible input as well as creating chances for chances to encounter unknown words given the receptive vocabulary size of the students. Another reason that might have contributed to the results is students' motivation. The students were eager to engage in any activity related to the English course and learn more English which also stresses the importance of fostering a conducive learning environment that nurtures students' intrinsic motivation.

The second research question aimed to investigate which type of reading leads to higher gains regarding receptive vocabulary among Moroccan high school EFL students. In this regard, the results from the VKS showed that the participants from the same theme and same author group slightly outperformed those in the same author group. However, these two groups significantly outperformed the unrelated texts group. These findings support results from previous research (Cho et al., 2005; Kang, 2015). The coherence provided by shared themes likely aided in contextualizing and reinforcing vocabulary acquisition, complementing the stylistic familiarity associated with the same author's works. Consequently, this combination may offer a more conducive environment for vocabulary retention by reducing the amount of time and cognitive effort required to comprehend a text. In other words, the students in this condition managed to build a schemata related to the texts which might have lessened the cognitive load needed to process the texts (Gan, 2014).

The outcomes observed in the narrow reading group conditions can also be clarified through the principles of the input hypothesis which argues that students are more likely to acquire language when it is a bit beyond their actual level of competence (Krashen, 1982). In this study, the texts were chosen taking into consideration students' receptive vocabulary which is the one required for reading (Nation, 2012). It is worth noting also that while narrow reading seeks to provide comprehensible input for students, choosing texts by the same author can have extra benefits. In the present study, the results show that the same author and same theme group outperformed, though not significantly, the same theme group. This might be attributed to students' familiarity with the writer's style (Krashen 2004) thus shifting attention towards vocabulary learning.

Based on a general discussion with the three groups after taking a surprise posttest, responses from the same author and same theme group shed light on factors that may have helped the participants in this condition to develop more receptive vocabulary knowledge. For instance, most of the participants reported that they read the second, third, and fourth texts with ease and expectations especially that they knew they would read texts dealing with animals. The texts were "like walking in a zoo" to quote one of the students which shows the extent to which connections between the texts were created. Also, the students emphasized that the themes helped them learn more vocabulary like "kids, different, see, fly, plant" in context. This is also supported by early research that texts with higher lexical repetitions help students lower the vocabulary burden in comparison to texts with higher lexical variation

(Kyongho & Nation, 1989; Nation, 2013; Schmitt & Carter, 2000). Unsurprisingly, the participants in the same author and the unrelated texts groups could not recognize the link between the texts.

Pedagogical Implications and Conclusion

The present study provided empirical evidence that different types of reading texts contribute to the development of the receptive vocabulary knowledge of Moroccan high school EFL students. Although the different types of texts in the three conditions helped students develop their receptive vocabulary, better results were achieved when the participants read texts that revolved around the same topic and were written by the same author. These findings have many implications for EFL teachers. First, engaging students in reading materials at the appropriate level should always yield positive results regarding vocabulary learning. Second, students tend to enjoy reading more when students read texts on the same theme which may be a factor in favor of receptive vocabulary development. Third, providing students with chances to consolidate vocabulary they met before, especially when the context is familiar, is likely to ease the burden of learning vocabulary.

Although the present study provides substantial evidence for the effect different text types may have on the receptive vocabulary knowledge of Moroccan high school EFL students, it should be noted that it has its own limitations. First, the results are not generalizable because the sample is drawn only from one school. Second, pretesting target word form recognition with all the participants before the experiments would have been more significant. Third, the absence of a delayed post-test makes it impossible to trace the long-term effect of the different types of reading on vocabulary retention. It is therefore recommended that future studies exploring the impact of narrow reading on the receptive vocabulary knowledge of Arab students adopt a pre-test, immediate post-test, and delayed post-test design. This methodological approach would offer valuable insights into the enduring effects of narrow reading on the receptive vocabulary of Arab learners over time. Also, it would be interesting to study the effect of narrow reading on the productive vocabulary knowledge of beginners.

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