

Enhancing English Reading Comprehension of EFL Undergraduate Students through Narrative Texts

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Abstract

This study aimed to: 1) investigate the extent to which narrative texts enhance reading comprehension among first-year students at a private university in Bangkok, and 2) explore students' attitudes toward learning to read through narrative texts. The participants were 25 first-year students at the Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology. Narrative texts were implemented with the participants over a period of 10 weeks. The research instruments included identical English reading comprehension tests administered as pretest and posttest, and a reading attitudes questionnaire. The data were analyzed using mean scores, standard deviation, and a dependent samples t-test.

The results indicated that narrative texts significantly improved students' reading comprehension. The posttest scores were significantly higher than the pretest scores ($p < .01$). In addition, most students demonstrated positive attitudes toward learning English reading through narrative texts.

Keywords: English reading comprehension, EFL Undergraduate students, Narrative texts

Introduction

In this era, the English language is a necessary tool for worldwide communication. As a result, in today's fast-paced world of globalization, anyone with any level of ambition must be able to connect with people from all over the world. Additionally, in this day and age of optimal data flows of information, it becomes necessary for individuals to have the means to select data that is relevant to them in both their career and personal lives in a fast and efficient way. Briefly, this means that readers must read more effectively, not only by reading faster but also with better comprehension. Therefore, it is important to explore effective approaches to enhance reading efficiency and comprehension. Reading comprehension is an important tool that helps in acquiring self-knowledge and brings the knowledge to use. Students have to practice reading comprehension skills and make them more efficient. According to Kaewkam (2013) reading is a tool to seek knowledge, help to develop intelligence, thinking, decision making, career, and education. It can help the readers track the progress of the world in an instant and also generate knowledge and enjoyment. On the other hand, it is found that teachers still teach English reading in the same way.

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Students read, repeat, and then translate the texts being studied. Teachers do not adopt new modifications or teaching techniques for teaching students. Furthermore, Rungswang and Kosashunhanan (2021) find that a large number of Thai university-level students have negative attitudes toward studying English and experience difficulties in reading English narrative texts.

Students with reading problems have difficulty with both studying and their personalities. According to Alderson (2000: 53), poor first and second-language readers lack motivation to read or to spend time improving their ability to read. Narrative texts or texts that tell stories can be used to improve students' reading abilities. As a result, the use of narrative texts can be considered an effective way to help students improve their reading comprehension. Narrative texts usually present events in a clear sequence with familiar characters, settings, and plots, which makes the content easier for students to follow and understand. In addition, stories naturally attract students' interest and motivation, encouraging them to engage more actively with the text. This engagement helps learners connect ideas, predict events, and interpret meanings more effectively while reading. According to Alderson (2000), what causes difficulty in texts is the way the text is written: the styles or features that make one text different from another. Expository texts are harder to process than narrative texts. The structure associated with stories (story grammars) seems to facilitate comprehension by allowing readers to quickly construct a model of the text. In addition, narrative texts appear to induce visualization in readers as part of the reading process. In other words, readers can see scenes in their heads when they read narrative texts. The visualization helps readers understand texts more easily, and readers do not feel discouraged. Furthermore, one purpose of narrative text is to entertain. Readers enjoy reading texts and are excited to know what will happen next. In this way, narrative texts can help increase students' motivation. This is consistent with the research of Kintsch (1998) who studied the teaching of narrative texts through fiction and nonfiction narratives. This study showed that this type of teaching can also increase social and emotional competencies. Moreover, many narratives contain morals and themes. For example, fables are short stories followed by an important moral point. According to Pearson and Fielding (1991), students benefit from reading narrative texts. Therefore, reading instructors can use narratives to teach moral lessons.

As an English teacher at a private university in Bangkok, Thailand, the researcher has observed that many first-year students, all of whom have completed Matthayom Suksa 6 (M6), experience difficulties in reading English. This observation is consistent with previous studies indicating that Thai EFL learners frequently encounter problems in reading comprehension (e.g., Thongwicht, 2018; Rungswang & Kosashunhanan, 2021). Students who struggle with reading often face difficulties in their academic studies and may develop negative attitudes toward learning English. According to Thongwicht (2018), students with problems in school are passive learners, have low self-esteem, emotional problems, poor attention and concentration, have difficulty making and keeping friends, and lack motivation. Because of these deficiencies, remedial or corrective instruction is necessary to help students succeed in their English reading. As a result, narrative texts, or texts that tell stories, can be used to improve students' reading comprehension.

Literature Review

The Nature of Reading

In the literature, reading has been defined in a number of different ways by many experts. Frank (2004) defines reading as a process of setting up new knowledge in the mind. It requires the reader's attention to acquire new knowledge. Next, Grabe and Stoller (2002) define reading as the ability to understand meaning from the written page and understand the information correctly. Perhaps, students just read without knowing the meaning of what they read. So, it emphasizes not only reading practice in a reading activity but also comprehending a reading passage. As a complex activity, reading includes two activities which are seeing and thinking. Moreover, Harmer (2001) adds that the eyes and brain are frequently used in this activity. Since reading is a visual activity, the eyes play an important role. They are devices for collecting information and to then pass this information to the brain, the brain then determines what and how this information is perceived. These decisions are formed based on the information from the eyes, which is influenced by prior knowledge (Frank, 2004). In other words, reading can be defined as the ability to understand written words and their meaning correctly. It involves both seeing and thinking activities. The eyes collect and deliver information to the brain, and then the brain processes the information to construct the meaning. In addition, reading is an active thinking process that depends not only on word recognition skills but also on the reader's own experiences and previous knowledge. The readers will understand the text easily if they are familiar with the type of text given.

Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is central to the reading process. A reader's success is often evaluated based on the ability to understand ideas and information presented in a text. According to Snow (2002), reading comprehension involves three key elements, i.e., the reader, the text, and the purpose of reading. Snow (2002) further explains that reading is an activity through which meaning is constructed via interaction with written text.

Similarly, Nunan (2003) defines reading comprehension as a process of constructing meaning by integrating information from the text with the reader's background knowledge. Therefore, background knowledge plays a crucial role in facilitating effective comprehension.

What is Narrative Text?

According to Kane (2000), narrative text is a meaningful series of events written in words. It can be an imaginary story or based on a real incident. Moreover, the story of animals (fable), the story of people (folktale), and legend can be found in narrative text (Mukarto & Sujatmiko, 2007). In other words, narrative text is a written text that contains a message which is aimed at making the reader understand the meaning of the story. Moreover, a narrative text is a text that is an imaginative story to entertain the reader, as stated by Grace (2016). Narrative text has a generic structure, namely: Orientation: It is about the opening paragraph

in the story of the text. Orientation introduces the characters of the story to the reader. It consists of the characters who are in the story, the setting, and when the story happened. Complication: The problems in the story are developed. Resolution: The problems in the story are solved. Does the problem have a happy ending or a bad ending? Coda/reorientation (optional): the lesson that we can get from the story. In addition, narratives inspire imagination. According to Pearson and Fielding (1991), narratives are written to inspire personal responses. Through stories, readers leave the limits of their everyday lives and “travel” to the prairie of Virginia with Jim Burden in *My Antonia* (by Cather), or to Wallowa Valley in *Thunder Rolling in the Mountains* (by Scot O’Dell and Elizabeth Hall). In this way, readers learn to represent people, objects, and events in their imagination (Graesser, Golding, & Long, 1991). Thus, cognitive growth is fostered by an imaginative experience. Students become involved in narratives they read and put themselves in the character’s place, asking themselves, “What would I do if I were this character?” Most students have personal responses to the stories: typically, I disliked the story; it was O.K.; I liked it; I loved it. When instructors ask them their reaction, instructors honor their opinions, focus on enjoyment, and raise self-esteem (Richek, Caldwell, Jennings, & Lerner. 1996: p.157). Therefore, in this way, instructors can foster students' higher-level thinking and imagination through narrative texts.

How Can Reading Instructors Teach Students to Comprehend Narrative Texts?

According to Richek, Caldwell, Jennings, and Lerner (1996: 156), effective reading instruction consists of three stages: before reading, during reading, and after reading. In the pre-reading stage, instructors activate students’ background knowledge, build relevant schema, and address potential misconceptions while introducing the text. During the reading stage, instructors encourage silent reading, guide students to make predictions, and support them in monitoring their comprehension. In the post-reading stage, instructors assess comprehension and promote active responses to the text.

These instructional stages can be effectively applied to teaching narrative texts. Accordingly, the present study adopts the three-stage framework—pre-reading, during reading, and post-reading—as the basis for lesson design and implementation.

Objectives

The objectives of this study were as follows:

1. to investigate the extent to which narrative texts can help first-year students at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology to read English more effectively
2. to explore the students’ attitudes towards learning to read through the use of narrative texts

Conceptual Framework

In developing the conceptual framework for this study, the researcher reviewed relevant studies and literature (Richek, Caldwell, Jennings, & Lerner, 1996; Grace, 2016).

The independent variable

The technique of teaching English

reading through narrative texts,

Incorporating

Before-Reading

1. Activate prior knowledge

2. Correct misconception

3. Mention something students

might enjoy or learn from the text

During-Reading

4. Encourage silent reading

5. Ask students to predict what happens next while reading the narrative text

6. Encourage students to monitor their comprehension

After-Reading

7. Check comprehension

8. Encourage active response



The dependent variable

The subjects' English reading



The subjects' attitude towards learning to read through narrative texts

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

1. Participants

The participants in this study were 25 first-year students from one intact class at the Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology, a private university in Bangkok, Thailand. All first-year students were required to enroll in ENL-122 (English Language Skill Development) during the second semester of the 2025 academic year, with a total of three instructional hours per week, divided into two sessions of 1.5 hours each.

The sample was selected using a purposive sampling technique from a total of five classes. The participants were classified into three levels of English proficiency—high, moderate, and low—based on their final grades in ENL-121 (English for Communication) in the first semester of the 2025 academic year.

2. Instrumentation

The research instruments consisted of lesson plans, an English reading comprehension test, and a questionnaire assessing students' attitudes toward learning English reading comprehension through narrative texts.

2.1 Lesson Plans

Six lesson plans were designed following the procedures for teaching English reading through narrative texts, incorporating the three stages of instruction: pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading. The Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) was evaluated by three experts, and all lesson plans yielded IOC values above 0.50, indicating acceptable content validity.

2.2 English Reading Comprehension Test

The English reading comprehension test comprised 30 multiple-choice items, each with four answer options. The test was designed to assess students' comprehension of narrative texts, including identifying the main idea, understanding details, making inferences, and interpreting vocabulary in context. Each correct response was awarded one point, for a total possible score of 30.

Content validity was verified by three experts, with IOC values for all items exceeding 0.50. Item difficulty indices (p) ranged from 0.20 to 0.80, which are within an appropriate range. The reliability of the test was calculated using the Kuder-Richardson formula (KR-20), yielding a coefficient of 0.85, indicating high reliability. The same test was used for both the pre-test and post-test, with the order of answer choices rearranged to minimize recall effects.

2.3 Attitude Questionnaire

The questionnaire assessing students' attitudes toward learning English reading through narrative texts consisted of 10 Likert-scale items and one open-ended question. Participants indicated their level of agreement with each statement on a five-point scale. Three experts evaluated the questionnaire, with IOC values ranging from 0.50 to 1.00, ensuring content validity. The questionnaire was piloted with 40 students in the first semester of the 2025 academic year at Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology, yielding a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.82, indicating acceptable reliability.

3. Data Collection

This study employed a quasi-experimental design, specifically a one-group pretest–posttest design (see Table 1). The pretest and posttest were administered to measure the effects of using narrative texts on students' English reading comprehension before and after the instructional intervention.

Table 1 Research Design

Pretest	Experiment	posttest
T_1	X	T_2

T_1 = Pretest session administered before the teaching experiment (1 hour)

T_2 = Posttest session administered after the teaching experiment (1 hour)

X = Teaching experiment using narrative text as an English reading instruction technique (10 periods)

4. Research Procedure

English reading comprehension was taught through narrative texts for 1.5 hours per week during the second semester. The research procedures were as follows:

4.1 Pretest Administration: The pretest was administered to the experimental group at the beginning of the study to assess students' initial reading comprehension ability.

4.2 Instructional Treatment: Following the pretest, the experimental group received instruction using narrative texts for one 90-minute session per week. The treatment lasted for 10 sessions in total, excluding the pretest, posttest, and questionnaire administration.

4.3 Posttest Administration: At the end of the 10-week instructional period, the posttest—identical in content to the pretest but with rearranged answer choices—was administered to evaluate students' reading progress.

4.4 Data Analysis of Reading Comprehension: The pretest and posttest scores were compared using a paired-samples t-test.

4.5 Attitude Questionnaire: A questionnaire assessing students' attitudes toward learning English through narrative texts was distributed to the same group of students for completion.

4.6 Conclusion: The results of the tests and questionnaires were analyzed, and conclusions were drawn regarding the effectiveness of narrative texts in enhancing reading comprehension and students' attitudes.

5. Data analysis

5.1 Reading Comprehension Scores: Students' pretest and posttest scores were compared using a paired-samples t-test to determine the effect of narrative texts on reading comprehension.

5.2 Attitude Questionnaire: Data from the questionnaire were analyzed using mean scores and standard deviations. The results were interpreted at the item level to assess students' attitudes toward learning English through narrative texts.

Result

1. Research Question 1. To what extent does narrative text help students gain reading comprehension?

Table 2 The comparison of average scores of the students' reading ability before and after the experiment

Group size	Before Experiment	After Experiment	Mean Difference
25	12.52	18.23	5.71

From Table 2, the results indicated that the overall scores of the reading ability of the students increased after the experiment, with the average pretest score of 12.52 and average posttest score of 18.23, and an average gain score of 5.71. Detailed examination of each individual's reading ability gained score revealed that the students in the experiment could improve their reading ability after the experiment, with the highest posttest score of 10 and the lowest gain score of 2, (see Table 3). This was interesting considering the fact that before the experiment, the number of students who passed the average score of 50% was 8, or equivalent to 35% of the total number, with the scores ranging from 16-21. The number of students who did not pass an average score of 50% was 17, or equivalent to 65%, with the scores ranging from 7-13. After the experiment, however, the number of students who passed the average score of 50% became 21, or equivalent to 85%, with the scoring from 16-25. And the number of students who did not pass the average score of 50% was only 4, or equivalent to 15%, with scores ranging from 12-14, all of which increased their scores of reading ability from 5-6 points, or equivalent to 16.68-23.34%.

Table 3 The Students' English reading ability before and after the experiment

Students	Before Experiment (30 points)	After Experiment (30 points)	Mean Differences (D)
1	10	16	6
2	9	16	7
3	9	17	9
4	10	16	6
5	17	20	3
6	16	19	3
7	7	16	9
8	8	14	6
9	17	25	8
10	9	16	7
11	10	16	6
12	8	14	6
13	19	21	2
14	7	12	5
15	11	16	5
16	18	25	7
17	9	12	3
18	21	25	4
19	10	20	10
20	11	20	9
21	11	21	10
22	17	22	5
23	13	18	5
24	13	20	7
25	19	25	6
X	12.52	18.23	5.71

After calculating the mean differences of the students' reading ability before and after the experiment, the researcher used the T-test for Dependent Samples. The results were presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4 The students' English reading ability before and after the experiment

The Students' English Reading Ability	N	t	Significance(2-tailed)
Experimental Group	25	-11.215**	<0.01

The result in Table 4 revealed that at the 0.01 level of significance, there was a significant difference between the mean scores before and after the experiment. This showed that the students could learn English reading by using narrative texts. It could be concluded that teaching English reading through narrative texts had positive effects on the students' English reading comprehension. In other words, it could be assumed that this technique enabled the students to gain reading comprehension.

2. Research Question 2. What were students' attitudes towards learning to read through the use of narrative text?

Table 5 Mean, Standard Deviation, and Interpretation of the Students' Post-Learning Attitudes

Statement	Mean	S.D.	Level
1. Narrative text has made reading less boring.	4.30	.57	Very High
2. Narrative text has helped me improve my reading skills in a systematic manner	3.81	.77	High
3. Narrative text has helped me improve my collaborative skills.	3.84	.75	High
4. Narrative text has helped me exchange views with my classmates.	4.11	.55	High
5. Narrative text has helped me become a more enthusiastic learner.	4.16	.49	High
6. Narrative text has helped me think systematically about the main idea of the passages more accurately.	3.90	.79	High
7. Narrative text has given me more confidence when reading English passages.	4.04	.61	High
8. Narrative text has helped me retain memories longer of the passage being read.	3.71	.47	High
9. Narrative text has helped me memorize details of reading passages more explicitly.	4.20	.41	High
10. Narrative text has helped me identify the main idea of the passages more accurately.	4.00	.65	High
Total	4.02	.35	High

The results in table 5 showed that the attitudes that students had toward using narrative text were at a high level ($\bar{X}=4.02$). When reviewing the individual statements, it was found that the students had a high level of attitude in all items. The three statements with the highest mean scores were ‘Narrative text has made reading less boring’ ($\bar{X}=4.30$); ‘Narrative text has helped me memorize details of reading passages more explicitly’ ($\bar{X}=4.20$); ‘Narrative text has helped me become a more enthusiastic learner’ ($\bar{X}=4.16$). The item with the lowest mean score was ‘Narrative text has helped me retain memories longer of the passage being read’ ($\bar{X}=3.71$), which was still at a high level.

Discussion

This research project studied the use of Narrative texts and the students’ English reading comprehension. The purpose was to obtain the results and findings that could give answers to the research question: 1. To what extent did narrative texts help students gain reading comprehension? and 2. What were students’ attitudes towards learning to read through the use of narrative texts? Therefore, the following section provides answers and discussion with regard to the research questions.

Research Question 1. To what extent did narrative text help students gain reading comprehension?

This question was answered by the experiment. The results of the experiment showed that the students, after exposure to Narrative texts, could get higher scores. The finding suggested that the students taught through Narrative texts improved their English reading comprehension (see Figure 2, Figure 3 and Figure 4).

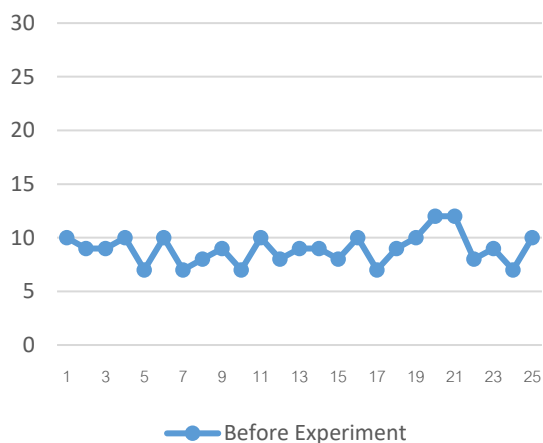


Figure 2 Pretest Scores

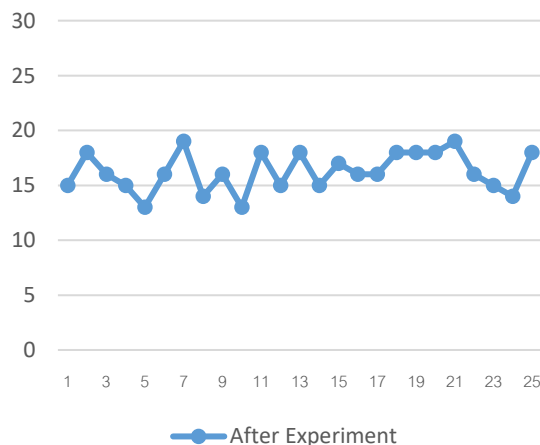


Figure 3 Posttest Scores

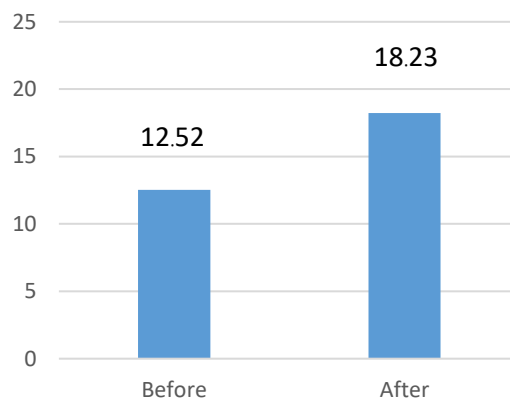


Figure 4 A Comparison of Mean Scores of the Students' Reading Ability Before and After the Experiment

The results of this study were in accordance with the studies on narrative text conducted in the context of Thailand by Tubmune et al (2022), which indicated that tales and narrative texts can increase students' achievement. The research results were supportive of Romli (2014) whose research revealed that students who learned English through using narrative text improve their comprehension of reading. It provided a visual-spatial display for key information contained in narrative texts, including title, setting, character, event, problem, and solution, which enhanced the students' ability to focus on what they needed to know from reading the story. Moreover, the course was integrated with before, during, and after activities, which would allow students to become acquainted with the content of the instruction. This was in line with Herman (2009), who argued that the activities mentioned above helped students work on relating the story parts, clarify the elements of the story, and helped learners who faced difficulty with reading to activate their schemata.

The test used in the research might pose a problem for the study. When developing the test, the researcher must make several decisions, including ensuring the test was both valid and reliable, as well as selecting the number and length of the reading passages and the item format. The test contained both short and long reading passages, which could have influenced the examinees' scores. In addition, using many shorter passages could cover a wider range of content areas compared to using just one longer passage.

Research question 2. What were students' attitudes towards learning to read through the use of narrative text?

This question was part of a questionnaire that had undergone content validation using the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) and had already been tested for reliability. The result revealed that learning to read through narrative texts made the students enjoy learning English, and it helped improve their reading skills. Moreover, the technique of teaching English reading through narrative texts, incorporating before, during, and after reading, all of which were used as activities in the reading stages, also affected students' attitudes toward the narrative texts. The result revealed that learning to read English through narrative texts made the students enjoy the learning process a great deal because stories were engaging,

easy to relate to, and make learning feel natural and enjoyable. Moreover, when students previewed a text they read, they exploited the text by using what they already knew. This would help them understand the text and provided a framework for any new information they read. Moreover, some students gave useful comments on narrative texts in the last part of the questionnaire, the open-ended part. Most students reflected that they felt more confident in reading English through narrative texts, and were able to analyze and criticize the text more. It helped the students analyze the structure of the text they read, understand difficult texts better, think systematically, use their imagination reasonably, analyze and criticize texts systematically, improve reading speed, and retain longer memories of the texts they read. Therefore, the students mostly accepted the narrative texts as a tool to help them improve their reading skills. They mentioned that they would rely on narrative texts to strengthen their reading abilities.

Conclusions

The use of narrative texts was effective in improving first-year students' English reading comprehension. After the instructional intervention, students' posttest scores were significantly higher than their pretest scores, indicating notable improvement in reading ability. In addition, the students demonstrated positive attitudes toward learning English through narrative texts, suggesting that narrative-based instruction can enhance both reading proficiency and learner motivation.

Suggestions

Based on the findings of this study, it is suggested that other factors may also influence students' English reading comprehension. Therefore, future research could conduct a comparative study examining the effectiveness of narrative texts versus other instructional techniques to further enhance reading comprehension and learning outcomes.

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