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# Enhancing English reading comprehension through narrative engagement among Thai elementary students: An explanatory mixed method study

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**ABSTRACT**

In an increasingly globalized world, English reading comprehension is an essential skill, particularly for young learners in non-native English-speaking contexts such as Thailand. This study investigates the role of narrative engagement in enhancing English reading comprehension among Thai elementary students using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. The participants consisted of 27 fifth- and sixth-grade students from a primary school in Satun Province, Thailand. Data were gathered through a reading comprehension post-test, a questionnaire, and classroom observation. Quantitative results showed a relatively high post-test mean score (M = 86.67, SD = 8.77). However, the absence of a pre-test or control group limits the ability to claim substantial improvement, as no baseline or comparison was available. Qualitative findings revealed that students developed emotional connections, maintained attention, and identified with story characters. Many reported feeling engaged, vividly visualizing scenes, and relating to the narratives. These findings suggest that narrative engagement can foster both cognitive and emotional involvement in reading, potentially supporting comprehension. Nevertheless, the small sample size (N = 27) restricts the generalizability of the results. The study recommends integrating narrative texts into English instruction to create more engaging and motivating reading experiences for young EFL learners, while future research should employ larger samples and experimental designs to strengthen the evidence.

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## Introduction

Reading comprehension is a critical skill for both academic achievement and cognitive development. This skill becomes even more essential for students who are learning English as a foreign language (Snow, 2002). Previous studies also highlight that effective reading comprehension plays a central role in shaping overall language proficiency (Hà & Bellot, 2020).

In Thailand, the government has introduced national reforms to improve English education, including the English Programme (EP) initiated in 2001. However, despite these initiatives, English reading instruction in many schools remains largely teacher-centered (Taladngoen, 2019). Such practices often result in low comprehension outcomes, limited vocabulary acquisition, and decreased student motivation (Yulianawati et al., 2022; Putri, Nugraha, & Ridwan, 2020). Similar findings were also reported by Okasha (2020), who noted that

teacher-centered methods reduce opportunities for active learning and engagement. These findings collectively underscore the need for more interactive, student-centered approaches to foster meaningful engagement with texts.

A growing body of research suggests that emotionally and cognitively engaging practices, especially through narrative texts, can enhance reading comprehension. Such approaches not only improve linguistic outcomes but also nurture empathy and critical reflection (Howell et al., 2024). Narrative engagement, defined as the psychological immersion of readers into a story, encompasses four dimensions: attentional focus, emotional involvement, narrative understanding, and identification with characters (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). Engagement across these dimensions promotes sustained attention, deeper empathy, and stronger internalization of meaning, all of which contribute to improved reading comprehension and retention.

Recent studies also demonstrate the effectiveness of narrative-based instructional strategies. Techniques such as storytelling, story mapping, digital storytelling, story retelling, collaborative learning, and the CIRC method have been shown to improve both reading outcomes and student participation (Santoso, Ginting, & Yulianto, 2023; Rahmawati, Pahlevi, & Wachyudi, 2021; Khusmiati, Nugraha, & Kartini, 2023). Other research further emphasizes that summarizing narrative texts helps students understand plot structures, character development, and thematic meanings more effectively (Ramirez-Avila & Barreiro, 2023; Sahibzada et al., 2021).

Despite these promising findings, research specifically examining narrative engagement as a psychological construct in Southeast Asian EFL contexts remains limited. The Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education (2022) highlights the importance of engagement in linking reading strategies, motivation, and academic performance. However, Thai elementary classrooms remain relatively underexplored in this area.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the influence of narrative engagement on Thai elementary students' English reading comprehension. More specifically, it explores how narrative engagement affects both the cognitive and emotional involvement of learners, as well as their post-test reading performance. This study is guided by two research questions: (1) to what extent does narrative engagement influence Thai elementary students' English reading comprehension? and (2) how does narrative engagement contribute to students' cognitive and emotional involvement in reading?.

## Method

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate the influence of narrative engagement on English reading comprehension among Thai elementary school students. The design began with a quantitative phase, followed by qualitative data collection to contextualize and interpret the results (Johnson et al., 2007).

The research was conducted at Darul Maaref School Foundation, Satun Province, Thailand, from August 1 to 27, 2024. The population consisted of Grade 5 and 6 students learning English as a foreign language. Using purposive sampling (Sugiyono, 2017), 27 students were selected based on their enrollment in English classes, variation in reading abilities, and willingness to participate. While this sampling technique ensured relevance to the research focus, the small sample size from a single school represents a limitation for external validity, as findings cannot be generalized even within the province.

The independent variable was narrative engagement, defined as students' emotional, cognitive, and experiential immersion in narrative texts (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). The dependent variable was English reading comprehension, measured through a post-test and classroom observation. The post-test consisted of six multiple-choice items and one open-ended essay question, with a maximum score of 100 points. Although this test provided an overview of comprehension, the limited number of items raises concerns about the reliability and validity of assessing such a complex construct. Moreover, no information on piloting, adaptation, or validation of the test and questionnaire was available, which further challenges the robustness of the instruments.

The questionnaire comprised ten Likert-scale items measuring aspects of engagement such as attention, interest, and emotional involvement. Responses were scored on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Data were analyzed descriptively using mean and standard deviation. While descriptive statistics offered a snapshot of student performance, the absence of inferential analysis or baseline measurement (e.g., pre-test or control group) prevents strong causal claims about the impact of narrative engagement. Potential confounding factors such as the Hawthorne effect or normal learning progress could not be ruled out.

In the qualitative phase, semi-structured classroom observations were conducted using checklists and field notes. Observed indicators included attentiveness, participation, and emotional responses during reading

activities. Data were analyzed thematically and triangulated with quantitative findings to provide contextual explanations.

The overall flow of the explanatory sequential design is presented in Table 1, which illustrates the integration of quantitative and qualitative procedures. This design enriched interpretation by linking numeric outcomes with observed engagement behaviors. However, methodological constraints—such as the limited sample, weak instrumentation, and reliance on descriptive analysis—should be acknowledged when interpreting the results.

Table 1. Flow of Data Collection in Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Design

| | Phase | Procedure | Product |
|---|---|---|---|
| Quantitative | Data Collection | Test (Post-Test) and Questionnaire | Numeric data |
| | Data Analysis | • Administering the reading comprehension post-test.<br>• Distributing and category the questionnaire.<br>• Using excel | Descriptive statistic |
| Qualitative | Data Collection | Observation (Semi-structured) | • Participation behaviour<br>• Emotional engagement<br>• Field notes |
| | Data Analysis | • Reviewing observation<br>• Connecting qualitative findings | • Active or passive participation<br>• High or low emotional engagement |
| | Integration of Findings | Interpretation and explanation of the quantitative and qualitative results | • Discussion<br>• Implications<br>• Future research |

## Result and Discussion

### Result

### The Impact of Narrative Engagement on Students' English Reading Comprehension

The post-test results indicated that students generally achieved relatively high and homogeneous scores. The mean score was 86.67, with a median of 90 and a standard deviation of 8.77. The fact that the median was higher than the mean suggests that most students performed well, with only a few lower scores pulling down the overall average. The standard deviation of 8.77 (8.77% of the maximum score of 100) reflects low variability, indicating that students' performance was fairly consistent.

For the essay component, the average score was 35.19 out of 40, with a standard deviation of 5.09. These findings confirm that students were not only able to answer multiple-choice questions but also articulate their understanding in writing, for instance, by explaining plot structure, character development, and the moral messages of the texts. However, without additional data such as frequency distributions, score ranges, pre-test comparisons, or a control group, claims regarding homogeneity and improvement remain limited to descriptive analysis. In other words, the results suggest a positive tendency but cannot serve as strong causal evidence.

### Contribution on Students Cognitive and Emotional Involvement

The questionnaire consisting of ten items provided insights into students' engagement with narrative texts. Most students reported that the stories were interesting, easy to visualize, and evoked emotional connections with the characters. Low standard deviation values (0.6–0.8) on most items indicate consistency in students' experiences. For example, the majority agreed that they could "clearly imagine the scenes of the story" (SD = 0.6) and "felt emotionally connected to the characters" (SD = 0.7).

Nevertheless, some variation emerged in aspects such as the relevance of the stories to personal experiences (SD = 0.8) and sustained attention throughout the narrative (SD = 0.8). This suggests that not all students felt equally connected to the content. Classroom observations enriched these findings: some students appeared

enthusiastic when discussing character motivations, while others participated only minimally. For instance, one student expressed, *"I felt like I was inside the story when the character faced difficulties,"* whereas another stated, *"I found it hard to follow the middle part of the story because there were many new words."*

These findings indicate that narrative engagement contributes to students' cognitive and emotional involvement, though the intensity of experiences varied. Thus, narrative-based learning can enhance motivation and comprehension, but its effectiveness is still influenced by individual factors such as language ability and prior experiences.

Table 2. Summary of Narrative Engagement Questionnaire Results

| Question | Interpretation |
|---|---|
| I found the story interesting and engaging. | Most students strongly agreed; the story effectively captured their attention and engagement. |
| I could clearly imagine the scenes in the story. | Students could visualize scenes vividly; low SD (0.6) suggests shared visualization experiences. |
| I felt emotionally connected to the characters in the story. | Strong emotional connection reported; slight variation (SD = 0.7) among responses. |
| The story captured my attention from beginning to end. | Generally positive, but with more variation (SD = 0.8); some students lost focus at certain parts. |
| I could easily picture the settings described in the story. | Most could imagine settings clearly; minor variation in perception. |
| I felt like I was part of the story while reading it. | Students felt immersed in the narrative; SD (0.6) shows consistent experience across the class. |
| The story made me think about similar situations in my own life. | Mixed responses; SD (0.8) suggests varied levels of personal relatability |
| I wanted to know what would happen next as I read the story. | High curiosity among students; SD (0.7) indicates some variation in narrative suspense experienced. |
| The story helped me to understand the characters' feelings and motivations. | Strong agreement; character development was well understood, with minimal response variation (SD = 0.6). |
| I found it easy to follow the plot of the story. | Students generally found the plot easy to follow; SD (0.6) indicates consistency in comprehension |

**Discussion**

The results of this study indicate that narrative engagement can positively influence Thai elementary students' reading comprehension. Post-test data revealed a relatively high mean score (M = 86.67, SD = 8.77), while the essay test also showed strong performance in plot analysis, characterization, and interpretation of moral messages. These findings suggest that students were not only able to recall content but also demonstrate deeper levels of understanding.

The questionnaire results reinforced this outcome, as most students reported that the stories were engaging, easy to visualize, and emotionally meaningful. Observational data further supported this, showing that students were attentive, responsive, and actively participated during the lessons. Together, these findings highlight the potential of narrative texts to foster both cognitive and emotional involvement in reading.

Previous research has similarly emphasized the effectiveness of narrative-based strategies in EFL classrooms. For instance, Santoso, Ginting, and Yulianto (2023) reported that storytelling improved comprehension outcomes. Rahmawati, Pahlevi, and Wachyudi (2021) found that narrative tasks increased student motivation and participation. Other studies also highlighted the importance of narrative structures and emotional immersion in strengthening comprehension and critical thinking (Ramirez-Avila & Barreiro, 2023; Sahibzada et al., 2021). These parallels suggest that the present findings are consistent with broader evidence in the field.

From a theoretical perspective, the four dimensions of narrative engagement—attentional focus, emotional involvement, narrative understanding, and character identification—were clearly observable in the classroom (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009). Students displayed sustained concentration, expressed laughter or sympathy during the stories, and often related personal experiences to the text. Such behaviors align with Dual Coding Theory, which posits that comprehension improves when verbal and visual channels are activated simultaneously (Paivio, 1991). Schema Activation Theory also provides an explanation, as learners constructed new understanding by linking narratives to prior experiences (Anderson, 2010).

Despite these encouraging findings, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged. The absence of a pre-test or control group makes it difficult to determine whether the observed outcomes were solely due to

narrative engagement. In addition, the small sample size (N = 27) limits the generalizability of the results to wider EFL populations. Finally, reliance on self-reported questionnaire data may introduce bias, as younger students tend to provide socially desirable responses.

Taken together, the findings suggest that narrative engagement has considerable pedagogical potential, particularly in fostering student motivation, attentional focus, and emotional connection to texts. However, these conclusions must be interpreted with caution. Future studies should employ more rigorous experimental designs, including baseline measures, larger samples, and comparative groups, to provide stronger evidence of causal relationships. Exploring long-term effects of narrative-based instruction would also help determine its sustainability in enhancing reading comprehension

## Conclusion

This study investigated the influence of narrative engagement on the English reading comprehension of Thai elementary school students using an explanatory sequential mixed-method design. The findings suggest that narrative-based reading activities may enhance students' comprehension, as indicated by relatively higher post-test scores and students' self-reported engagement with narrative texts. Participants described experiencing attentional focus, imaginative visualization, emotional connection with characters, and sustained interest, which appeared to support their understanding of plot structure and thematic elements. These results provide preliminary support for the theoretical framework of narrative engagement theory (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009) and indicate the potential value of narratives in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms.

However, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study involved a small sample from a single school, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. The post-test consisted of a limited number of items, raising concerns about measurement validity. In addition, the short intervention period did not allow for examination of long-term effects on comprehension or motivation.

In light of these limitations, the results should be interpreted with caution. While the findings provide useful insights, they are not sufficient to make strong pedagogical claims. Future research should employ larger and more diverse samples, use more robust assessment instruments, and explore longer-term implementations of narrative engagement across different genres and educational contexts.

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