

ENHANCING MOTIVATION FOR READING IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT:

RESEARCH HAS DEMONSTRATED THE PROMINENT ROLE OF THE TEACHER AS A MOTIVATOR IN THE ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASS. POSITIVE MOTIVATION IMPROVES STUDENT COMPREHENSION AND ASSIMILATION OF ENGLISH BOTH BY EXPOSURE TO THE SPOKEN LANGUAGE AND THROUGH ENHANCED IMMERSION INTO EXTENSIVE READING. OUR STUDY INTENDS TO SHOW THAT MOTIVATION HAS AN ESSENTIAL ROLE IN DEVELOPING THE READING SKILLS THAT THE YOUNG GENERATION IS IN GREAT NEED OF TODAY AND THAT LANGUAGE INSTRUCTORS CAN HAVE A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON STUDENT MOTIVATION FOR READING. THE INTRODUCTORY PART WILL DISCUSS INTERPRETATIONS OF THE CONCEPT OF MOTIVATION, WHILE THE REST OF OUR PAPER WILL REVIEW RESEARCH ON MOTIVATION FOR EFL READING AND LEARNING, AS WELL AS FOCUS ON IN-CLASS MOTIVATION DEVELOPMENT. WE WILL CONCLUDE BY PROPOSING A SET OF PRINCIPLES TO WORK WITH WHEN DESIGNING CURRICULA AND LESSON PLANS WHICH ATTEMPT AT REVIVING STUDENTS' PASSION FOR READING IN EFL.

KEY WORDS: MOTIVATION, READING, EFL (ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE), SKILLS

In the current social and global context, students seem to be overwhelmed by the amount of information they take in each day, especially via the online media. Our experience as educators has pointed to the fact that even though, on the one hand, over-exposure to virtual information alone cannot quench the thirst for deep knowledge, on the other hand it appears that many members of the young generations have gradually lost their taste for the pleasure of reading and for using reading as a self-development tool.

In the case of foreign language learning, reading could most likely be considered, besides the conversations with native speakers of English in authentic contexts, one of the most efficient methods of vocabulary acquisition, grammatical structure validation and cultural immersion. English has become an international communication device for quite a long time, but sadly and paradoxically, its quantitative use has been increasing to the detriment of the quality of the language employed in everyday speech and writing.

As the four skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing - are intimately correlated and interdependent, the scarcity of reading practice is reflected in the quality of speech, in the

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depth of comprehension and in the efficiency and accuracy of productions in writing. In the absence of reading, extensive exposure to colloquial English alone most often cannot guarantee progress in the assimilation and use of the formal or even the academic linguistic registers, and it is not rare when the quality of basic conversation suffers obvious negative alterations. Under the current circumstances in which language instructors face the effects of the poor reading practice of their students on a daily basis, it is paramount that the English teacher should play a prominent role as a motivator in increasing the quantity and quality of reading both in class and outside class.

A good understanding of motivation is a first and foremost condition for a successful impact of the language teacher as a motivator. It is not an easy task to review definitions and explanations of motivational concepts, because they are so numerous that people interested in studying motivation may become confused or bewildered by the many aspects it involves (see Murphy & Alexander, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2006). Speaking from a psychological point of view, some theorists say that “To be motivated means to be moved to do something... Someone who is energized or activated toward an end is considered motivated.”¹ Other researchers consider that “Motivation deals with... the choices individuals make about which activity to do or not to do, their degree of persistence at the chosen activities, and the amount of effort they put forth to do the activity.”²

While there is no single theoretical frame of motivation, there are certain general criteria that most researchers agree on as forming a workable definition of the concept. Motivation implies a set of values, beliefs, expectations, which usually focus on a combination of interest, self-regulation, goal-setting, efficacy, and involves a range of specific behaviors, such as engagement, persistence, and strategic problem-solving. Motivated individuals are optimistic, self-aware, self-confident and willing to work on difficult tasks. They want choice in controlling their environment and their learning, expect success, find pleasure in their work, and are proud of their achievements. Positive motivation is what activates effective learning behavior.³

Research on teaching motivation and the impact of motivation on learning, on study results and on success is a wide-spread topic among educational psychologists and language instruction theorists. J. Guthrie, for instance, emphasized that motivation research has demonstrated important findings related to reading development.⁴ He found that students with high intrinsic motivation reported a better use of comprehension strategies and improved comprehension of science texts.⁵ Research results made it obvious that students who are intrinsically motivated read more, and students with greater exposure to printed texts demonstrate improved comprehension and vocabulary growth.⁶ Therefore, it can be inferred that motivational factors have a notable influence on reading comprehension and the outcomes of reading practice, both directly and indirectly, which holds true for reading in EFL as well.

Until the 1990's, studies on motivation for EFL learning had been pervaded by R. Gardner's social-psychological theory of integrative and instrumental motivation (see, for

¹ R. Ryan and E. Deci, “Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions”, *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 25 (2000), 54

² A. Wigfield, “Facilitating children's reading motivation”, in *Engaging young readers: Promoting achievement and motivation*, ed. L. Baker et al. (New York: Guilford Press, 2000), 140-141

³ J. Guthrie and A. Wigfield, “Engagement and motivation in reading”, in *Handbook of reading research*, ed. M. Kamil et al. (Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum, 2000)

⁴ J. Guthrie and K. Knowles, “Promoting reading motivation”, in *Literacy and motivation: Reading engagement in individuals and groups*, ed. L. Verhoeven & C. Snow, (Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum, 2001)

⁵ Guthrie and Wigfield, *Engagement*

⁶ J. Guthrie et al., “Motivational and cognitive predictors of text comprehension and reading amount”, in *Scientific Studies of Reading* 3 (1999)

instance, Gardner, 2002).⁷ According to his theory, integrative motivation implies an individual's aspiration to identify with the target culture and adopt the language of the target culture, while instrumental motivation is associated with all the other reasons for learning the target language. Subsequently, it became obvious that different groups of language learners, from different social, geographical and ethnographic contexts generate fairly diverse profiles in terms of their motivation for language acquisition.

Our previous teaching experience in the Romanian university environment points out to the fact that the development of reading skills by students in EFL contexts does not seem to be as much influenced by social-identity factors as rather by academic factors and aspects pertaining to classroom settings, which are related to goals, interest, self-efficacy and intrinsic/extrinsic motivations. Aspects like student competence, autonomy in language use and the ability to network seem to be essential motivational factors in improving language learning skills in general, and reading skills in particular. These factors may be gradually enhanced when the language teacher adopts careful direction and instruction build-up, effective feed-back, supportive collaboration and activity coordination, as well as objective assessment among the attitudes which encourage a sense of acceptance and reward in students.

In his study on reading motivation, W. Grabe interestingly posits that "Research instruments and case-study investigations need to be designed to address reading abilities and motivations for reading. They should not be influenced by issues of ethno-linguistic identity, travel, friendship, a desire to communicate, or use of communication strategies. In reading development contexts, learner motivations need to explore issues of (a) reading interest; (b) the desire to read extended texts; (c) persistence at reading; (d) acceptance of academic challenges; (e) reading engagement; (f) the willingness to learn content from texts; (g) reading strategically; and (h) reading for enjoyment."⁸ We cannot adhere entirely and wholeheartedly to Grabe's opinion, since our experience of teaching EFL to Romanian students has revealed issues like travel, friendship, the desire to communicate for enjoyment purposes or in work-related contexts as key factors in building motivation for enhancing reading skills. These even seem to be aspects that teachers tend to draw on in attempting to help their students improve their motivation for reading both quantitatively and qualitatively in English.

Many EFL students, including Romanian ones, adopt a rather pessimistic view of becoming good, fluent readers in English, especially if we have in mind formal and academic linguistic registers. Students tend to consider reading development as hard work, and this is precisely where the role of the language instructor becomes a quintessential one in providing effective motivational support and designing curricula which include attractive reading activities that are tailored to students' particular needs. Research reports consulted (listed in References) generally indicate that what happens in the classroom on a regular basis has a very significant impact on students' reading motivation. While motivation may be promoted in multiple ways, three major themes seem crucial to its development in classroom contexts. Thus, language instruction should focus on:

- allowing successful task outcomes by students on a regular basis;
- promoting student autonomy; and
- supporting student collaboration.

Teachers should encourage a pleasant, creative atmosphere in class and ensure that students regularly experience success. They should also allow a certain degree of choice in students' instruction in order to boost their engagement in the learning process. Finally, they

⁷ R. Gardner, "Social psychological perspective on second language acquisition", in *The Oxford handbook of applied linguistics*, ed. R. B. Kaplan (New York: Oxford, 2002)

⁸ W. Grabe, *Reading in a Second Language: Moving from Theory to Practice*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 189

need to pursue the development of positive student-student and student-teacher relationships, and find creative methods of evaluation that improve confidence and stimulate motivation for progress. The pre-reading, reading and post-reading activities included in the EFL course support should be designed in such a way as to target the specific instruction needs and interest areas of the student target group, and they should invite to further study and practice.

A tentative list of teacher practices that are useful in promoting reading motivation could, perhaps, help language trainers and teachers in achieving superior results in bringing the reading skills of their students to a higher level. Here are a few items that could be part of this open list:

- encouraging students to share their interests;
- creating a pleasant classroom environment and stimulating group cohesiveness;
- communicating the usefulness of reading tasks;
- promoting effective goal setting and expected outcomes;
- making performance expectations clear;
- matching student skills with challenges;
- building students' self-confidence;
- making the curriculum relevant to students;
- including good lead-ins to all texts and reading tasks to stimulate initial interest;
- promoting active student participation and interactive learning;
- involving learners in decision-making related to reading tasks and goals;
- providing support with difficult texts, vocabulary items, tasks;
- giving motivating feedback on task completion and learning progress;
- encouraging students to read more extensively, both in school and at home.

By incorporating all or some of these suggestions in their teaching, and finding their personal ways of increasing motivation as well, EFL instructors will probably notice encouraging results in the development of students' reading skills.

Motivation for reading is a key aspect in the students' endeavor to enhance their reading skills and in their persistence in overcoming any limitations in becoming proficient readers in English. Learners of EFL only become skilled readers when they read extensively, and the role of the language instructor as a motivator is crucial in supporting students to meet this noble challenge. Further research into motivational factors in EFL learning and reading development could lead to the inference of inspirational practical techniques of stimulating reading motivation with different target groups of learners.

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