Establishing an L2 Reading Motivation Framework for Tertiary Education

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Introduction

Motivation is very important for student success in a reading programme. This small scale action research project investigated how an L1 reading motivation framework created for young readers could be applied both to extensive and exam style reading. The study focused on the motivational effects of these two different types of reading articles on young adult Emirati males studying in a tertiary institute in an independent learning environment.

The Study: Stage One

Unwrapping the News (UWN)

Our Independent Learning Centre (ILC) wanted to encourage students to do more extensive reading so we offered an activity called Unwrapping the News (UWN). We believed that if the ILC offered an extensive reading programme with simplified articles based on current events and student pursuits, the ILC would see an increased interest in reading for pleasure.

We presented a series of readings based on current events in the UAE, as well as science and technical topics that held potential interest for our students. The plan was for students to choose an article from the UWN box, read it and then approach an ILC or LRC (Learning Resource Centre) staff member to discuss the article. To entice students to read, the ILC added a task-contingent competition. For every article a student read and discussed, they earned a chance to take a layer of newspaper off of a mystery prize. The first student to remove the final layer of newspaper won the prize. There was no limit to how many articles each student could read and discuss.

To make a long story short, the UWN project was a failure. Over a three month period only five students, from a possible 522, actively participated. Of those five, two were on learning contracts and had been assigned the first reading as part of the work they were required to do. For students and ILC staff alike, UWN proved to be a very negative experience. After reviewing motivational literature, and considering student remarks, it became apparent that the project had not fostered an intrinsic need to read and that the mystery prize had undermined intrinsic motivation. Whether they did not believe that reading the articles would help them with their goals for learning, or they did not value the reading as part of their self-schema/identity, many students simply showed no interest in the UWN.

Of course not participating in the UWN did not prove that students were not motivated to read. Students who did not participate in the UWN displayed reading motivation by being autonomous learners. Students still used the ILC, copied reading materials, took home graded readers; however, they chose not to read the news articles. Guthrie (2001) points out that just because you are motivated, does not mean you like to read. Our students might have been motivated to read for their classes or for exam practice, but had no desire to read just for the sake of reading. Our students may have been unable to see the value of reading for pleasure in regards to their lives. Students commented that it would not help them with their classes and it would take too much time away from their studies. Some students remarked that they had family and other outside commitments that did not leave room just to read.

Some students were seen copying news stories, but chose not to come back and discuss the articles. These students had displayed signs of the preactional stage of Dörnyei and Otto’s (1999) process model of motivation. By asking about the materials they were displaying goal interest, but they never made that interest materialise into action. When I talked with students, they generally liked the idea of the UWN:
It's good, I think it's improve the reading.
It's a one of the good idea . . . to help them to read, push them to read, to find the answer.

However, they did not participate. Dörnyei and Otto feel that goal interest alone is not enough to energise a person to act. The basic idea was appealing, but there were too many other variables to distract them from taking part, suggesting they never left the preactional stage of motivation. Data, collected solely on the basis of casual observation and the total layers of newspaper that were unwrapped, led the ILC staff to feel that the UWN incentive had not been popular and therefore was not a success. However, was this really true? We witnessed students copying articles. Had they copied them because they had felt pressure from ILC/LRC staff to do so? Or is it possible that the UWN articles had created reading interest? Could the students see value in reading them? Perhaps their intrinsic motivation to read was strong, but they were not interested in doing the follow up activity in order to win the prize.

During the time we ran the UWN, the ILC noted that there was heavy use of other ILC reading materials, especially those in exam boxes. From casual conversation, it is apparent that students view materials that are not exam related as a burden or irrelevant. Is it possible that the students would read the UWN materials if they were in an acceptable exam format? Was there a reading motivational framework we could use to observe student motivation?

**The Study: Stage Two**

*Reading Motivational Framework*

In order for the ILC staff to really observe reading motivation, we would need an L2 reading motivation framework. Unfortunately, we could not find one. Despite the vast amount of research that has been done on L2 reading since the 1970s, there has been little research done into L2 reading motivation. Reading motivation in L1 is a fairly young topic and has focused mainly on primary school aged children.

In 2002, Mori did a study on female Japanese tertiary students using an L1 reading motivational framework (Table 1) by Wigfield and Guthrie (1995). Her results showed a connection between L1 and L2 reading motivation. She noticed that at the tertiary level, students read because they expected to succeed at an activity and they placed a value on that success. Moreover, her students were not motivated to read in order to belong to an L1 reading community, but read in order to succeed at university. The ILC decided to use the same Wigfield and Guthrie framework to see if our tertiary male Emirati students would also demonstrate a connection between L1 and L2 reading motivation.
Now that we had a framework, we were ready to revisit the original UWN materials. Would students read the materials if they looked like exam materials or would the results be the same?

**Materials: Exam reading versus extensive reading**

The ILC decided to observe whether or not students using the ILC and its materials, would display various aspects of reading motivation as set out by Wigfield and Guthrie. We would offer two types of reading:

1. The same extensive reading (ER/UWN) articles based on current events in the UAE with pictures and a simple glossary
2. The exact same articles in three exam formats: multiple choice, true/false and comprehension exercises

In order to facilitate motivation, all of the exam readings would come with answer keys and study tips. Dörnyei (2001a, 2001b) believes that motivation is a cyclical process consisting of three stages: preactional, actional and postactional. In the preactional stage, students feel a need to read. It is at this point that a student may seek out reading materials from an ILC. In the actional stage, students are motivated to do an exam reading which is followed by feedback in the form of answer keys. Once students have finished the reading and are checking their answers, they move into the postactional stage. This is where students decide if the reading was worth doing.
and if they would do similar readings again. This is in line with Wigfield and Guthrie’s idea of competence and reading efficacy and achievement values and goals.

Feedback alone does not change behaviour. Students must reflect on why answers are correct or incorrect. Reflection is what expands knowledge and leads to new understanding. Once students have understood the reasons underlying the answers, they are ready to apply that knowledge to future exercises, and exams. This leads to stronger task-mastery orientation which is vital to deep motivation. Students use feedback to improve their skills which prepares them for new reading challenges, including reading outside of these formal tasks (Guthrie, 2001).

The ILC displayed the UWN articles next to the exam articles, but we did not advertise the readings. Both boxes were trialed over a thirty day period. Each piece of reading had a yellow dot placed on it so it could be tracked. Documentary evidence was gathered by recording student reactions and personal observations in a diary. We also counted the materials that were put in the material return boxes and recorded the numbers on a tally sheet. Although not a hundred percent accurate, the tally sheet gave a good indication of what materials had been used over the thirty days.

**Observed student behaviour**

Students found the exam materials on the first day. As they had discovered the materials without any guidance, and had chosen the materials of their own free will, they were demonstrating their need for autonomy. The first thing they did was to start calling their friends on their mobiles. Then, they started making multiple copies of the exam materials. By sharing the information with their friends, discussing the topics and choosing the materials they would use, students displayed social reasons for reading, which is in line with Wigfield and Guthrie’s framework of L1 reading motivation.

Throughout the thirty day period, students continued to exhibit social behaviour in reading. Students rarely came in and worked alone. Usually they worked in pairs and small groups. We noticed that while they were working on the exam readings, they talked about them, discussed the answers, looked at ways of answering the questions and shared advice that they had learned from different teachers or other students. They also joked, laughed and created a very positive learning atmosphere. Their need for a social dimension to their reading seemed to lead to other areas of motivation such as reading involvement, reading curiosity and increased reading efficacy.

Students were observed looking at the materials in both the ER and exam boxes but chose mainly exam readings. ER articles appeared not to have value for meeting students’ learning goals. Students demonstrated a need for competence and reading-efficacy by selecting exercises they felt they could do successfully. Evidence of this can be found on the tally sheet. For the first two days, from materials found in the return boxes, we noted 26 multiple choice exercises, three True/False exercises, and zero comprehension or extensive reading articles. The multiple choice were the most popular reading exercises in the ILC. In expectancy-value theory, students expect to be successful at an activity and they perceive that task as having value to their lives (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). In selecting the multiple choice reading exercises, students were in fact expressing a feeling of confidence due to their prior successes with this type of reading task.

Research done with university students by Entwistle (1996) and Ramsden (1983, cited in Jacobs & Newstead, 2000), found that three different types of motivation existed: surface, deep and achievement. Surface motivated students do the least amount of work needed to pass (performance orientation). Deep motivated students are intrinsically interested in the materials
and want to expand their competence in that area (task-mastery orientation). Achievement motivated students want to increase their feeling of self-worth by getting top grades regardless of whether or not the information is interesting to them (Jacobs & Newstead, 2000).

Some students who worked on the exam materials in the ILC appeared to race through them. In reading, students who demonstrate task-mastery orientation try to improve their skills, accept challenges, work hard to understand reading content and are flexible when using reading strategies. Reading for understanding or enjoyment is intrinsically motivating. Task-mastery orientation is associated with deep motivation. On the other hand, a student who is performance oriented tends to use surface strategies to read. They are extrinsically motivated because the desire to finish a reading activity in order to get a high mark is more important than reading for understanding or enjoyment and this can lead to surface motivation (Guthrie, 2001).

More often than not, we observed performance orientation rather than task-mastery orientation because students did not use a dictionary, ask about mistakes or wrong answers, or seem as interested in the reading topics or content as they were in doing as many reading exercises as they could. However, this does not mean that our students were displaying surface motivation. Stribling (2003) asserts that achievement motivation is different from intrinsic and extrinsic motivation because it takes into account expectancy and incentive value of success. A student decides how important it is to achieve the task, whereas intrinsic motivation believes that a task is worth doing for the sake of doing it. Stribling also claims achievement motivation is different from surface motivation because a person retains information longer. Although our students tend to exhibit performance orientation by working quickly through exercises and are constantly needing more rather than reflecting on and reworking reading exercises, the fact that they use the ILC outside of class time, and do reading work that has not been assigned to them by a teacher, means they display achievement motivation rather than surface motivation.

During the thirty days I often spoke with students about the articles. I asked students to describe their reading habits in Arabic and English to see if there were any differences. In Arabic, students tended to read at home or at work. Sometimes they read in chairs, but often preferred to read in bed, on the floor, or in the majlis (a sitting room with Arabic sofas that sit low to the ground). All of the students I spoke to stressed that when they read in Arabic, they felt relaxed, preferred to read in quiet places and liked being comfortable.

However, when they read in English, students tended to read primarily at the college sitting in chairs. When they read in English at home, they tended to be doing homework. Our students do not appear to view reading in English as comfortable or relaxed, but more as schoolwork that should be done in a chair. English is seen more as an academic exercise than a pleasurable experience. This would go with findings by Smith and Wilhelm (2002) and Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1994) who found that males often see school as disconnected from their real lives and as such not a pleasurable experience.

When asked to look and compare the ER and exam articles, no student appeared to notice that the exam and the ER articles were word for word identical. Students did notice that there were no activities to go with the ER articles and they expressed a desire for them.

[About reading the ER article] Yes, ... but I couldn't find the answer [About the exam article] I prefer this one because it has questions and would help me practice for the exam, but the [ER article] doesn’t have any questions, so I will just to read the text. But when I finish it, there is nothing to help me search for information so maybe I will just read it and not have any knowledge about it. When there are questions, you can search about information and you will not forget it.
One student did notice that the topic of one article was space and he was interested in that, but he only noticed the topic on the ER which had pictures. The exam article without pictures was “boring”. This would suggest that the visual appeal of reading material is a motivating factor for our students and perhaps L2 reading motivation in general. Reading attractiveness is not included in Wigfield and Guthrie’s framework.

The most encouraging observation made over the 30 days was that most materials were taken on a Thursday. This is the start of the weekend in the UAE. Students were showing signs of autonomy, goal-setting, deep and intrinsic motivation by actively participating in the planning of their learning by choosing materials with the aim of studying outside of school hours. The exam reading materials combined with goal-setting have the potential to be influential motivators in long lasting behaviours such as learning an L2 and may facilitate a way for students to judge their progress over time.

Findings for Stage Two

At the end of the thirty days, the final tally, based on materials that were found in the material return boxes, was:

Exam formats: Total = 241
- Multiple choice exercises = 96
- True/false exercises = 77
- Comprehension exercises = 68

ER articles: Total = 8

Even though the ER materials had been written with students’ interests in mind, topic alone was not enough to make students put in the time and effort to read them. On the other hand, students had read the ER articles in an exam format. By having the readings look like an exam, with exercises to help them extract information from the texts, the materials contributed positively to promoting L2 reading motivation. This would suggest that students are less motivated by what they read, and more motivated by the feeling that the reading they do will help them in their studies to pass exams and get good grades, which correlates with achievement motivation. To add to this, during the thirty days no student seemed to notice, nor commented on the fact, that the materials in both boxes had identical content. This could mean that students who use the ILC may not exhibit deep motivation which leads to competence and multifaceted understanding of a subject area, but instead are prone to achievement motivation. The fact that they use the ILC to get extra work means that ILC users do not display surface motivation.

Conclusion

Throughout the study, observing students’ selection of reading materials revealed that exam practice was important for reading motivation. They showed a very strong tendency towards reading for grades. The ILC as such, does not have grades, but what the students were looking for was exam practice which would lead to higher grades and possibly teacher appraisal or reading recognition. The majority expressed feelings that learning for their subjects was important. Furthermore, exams validated the knowledge they had learned. This is important for ILC materials because if students cannot see the value of them, or feel the time and effort spent on them will not lead to academic success, they will not use them. Reading importance, how we view our past reading experiences and apply them to current or future reading situations, is crucial to L2 reading motivation.
In addition, students stressed that reading in English was often difficult and boring and as a result reading involvement and reading challenge were seen as negatively affecting reading motivation. Their lack suggests that too much exam practice has created negative washback and that the ILC must find ways of getting students to either effectively use reading strategies or find ways of changing student reading behaviour in order to create deeper motivation.

Clearly further research needs to be done to extend, confirm, modify or challenge the assumptions of this UAE study. It might be asked how well these findings operate in different contexts, among different age groups, in different populations, with different levels of academic achievement. As noted at the start, research into reading motivation of this kind is still in its infancy.

References


