Motivating Reluctant Readers

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Motivating reluctant readers can be quite challenging in today's world where reading competes with many technological distractions. Male students can be even more affected than female students when it comes to motivation and reading, especially when their predilection for video games is added into the equation. This action research project began as a means to increase our male students' interest in extensive reading at a tertiary English language foundation program at a college in the United Arab Emirates. It began as a pilot in the initial stages and expanded to include 10 classes and 8 teachers in the second half of the 2012-2013 academic year.

Reading Challenge Pilot

In the initial trial of the Reading Challenge, which occurred during the spring semester 2012, two classes of Levels 2 and 3 and their teachers participated. The choice of software for tracking the reading was Scholastic Reading Counts (SRC) (Create, 2014). This is a software program developed by Scholastic to encourage extensive reading in the United States for grades K-12 where English Language Learners (ELLs) lag behind their school counterparts in reading. The software is a Java-based platform, and it tracks what the students read by a point system, has a large number of Scholastic reading books in the program (though schools may add their own books with quizzes written by teachers or librarians), gives virtual certificates for successful completion (60%) of a 10-question quiz on a book read, and has a small cost per student for the

initial license (appoximately $5) and a smaller annual license renewal fee. Teachers and librarians may also track classes as well as individual students. This software was chosen because one of the participating teachers had previous experience with the program.

One of the teachers had the idea of making the Reading Challenge a competition. This was readily agreed to by the other teacher. Both teachers had observed how much their students liked in-class competitions and regularly used classroom games and competitions as a motivational strategy. Gustafson (2008) used a competition to motivate her male middle school students to read. Further evidence of the motivational aspects of competitions on Emirati society is found in the traditional sporting and performance competitions, such as camel racing, sword dancing, Nabati poetry, falconry, and dhow racing, which are sponsored by the government and local rulers often with very valuable prizes awarded (Hurreiz, 2002). In the trial of the Reading Challenge, two classes of students competed for the most points, and the top three readers were recognized from each class as well as the top reader overall. The prizes were symbolic, not valuable; the students received paper certificates made by the librarians. In the trial, the Level 3 class won the top prize for most points, and a student from Level 2 won the top prize overall for the top reader. Each student was also given a certificate of participation. The certificates were awarded at a small ceremony in the library with the library supervisor and program supervisors present.

During the trial, the teachers and librarians observed that the students were motivated by the competition. They went to the library to get their own books independently from a special trolley. The students knew and shared with their friends how many points each book was worth, and they used the tracking system regularly to check their points. They also proudly showed their teachers the virtual certificates

produced by the software program when they successfully completed a quiz with a pass of 60%. This may not seem like remarkable behavior, but before the trial, no students were taking graded readers from the library.

There were, however, some problems with the trial. The number of suitable titles available from the publisher was limited. Many titles were inappropriate due to content (high school boyfriends and girlfriends) or were culturally irrelevant (the father of my country, George Washington) as the books were written for primarily younger students studying in the USA. To supplement, about 20 ESL graded readers were added from the college's library, but a teacher or a librarian had to write quizzes for each book. Also, the day before the end of the pilot, one teacher observed a top reader in her class sitting with a student who had not read many books telling his friend all of the quiz answers to elevate his friend's standing in the final point count. This student's score had to be readjusted, and the points that were accumulated in a two-hour time frame the day before the competition ended were disallowed. Despite these problems, the trial was deemed a success because the students went from reading zero books on their own outside of class to reading an average of six books during the eight-week trial, with the top reader reading 12 books.

The Reading Challenge

The following year, the Foundations supervisors decided to include more teachers and students in the Reading Challenge to increase the number of students who were reading graded readers independently. The supervisors of Levels 1, 2, and 3, invited several teachers to participate in the Reading Challenge. Almost 200 students representing 10 classes and 8 teachers participated in the Reading Challenge pilot during the second semester of academic year 2012-2013.

The college had recently adopted the use of iPads in the Foundations program rather than laptops, which had been used previously. Because of the large number of interested participants, it was decided to trial the software program SRC together with the MReader website (formally the MoodleReader module), hosted by the Extensive Reading Foundation and developed by Tom Robb. The college library had funded 100 licenses from SRC, but the program would not work on iPads due to Java incompatibility. (There is now an app available). Students who used the SRC program had to go to the library to take their quizzes in a computer lab provided by the college, whereas MReader is compatible with the iPad.

Another significant difference between the two programs is that MReader now has quizzes for over 4,000 graded readers and youth titles (and is completely free to use) whereas teachers and librarians again had to write questions to increase the number of graded readers available to participants using SRC. Follow-up interviews revealed that teachers found writing quiz questions for books an onerous addition to their other duties. Students who used SRC also expressed dissatisfaction with the number of titles available for use with the program (approximately 150 titles). To make the two programs equal for comparison, the total number of words read counted for the total number of points earned, whereas the SRC program assigns a point value to each book based on a lexical formula.

It took almost an entire semester to prepare the Reading Challenge, getting teachers on board, writing questions for SRC, getting new library staff up to speed (including identifying and labeling books to be used in the Reading Challenge as SRC or MReader), and deciding the parameters of the competition, such as the start and end date,

the prizes to be awarded in which categories, and so on, since this time three Foundation levels would be involved.

The competition was rolled out to the students the first week of the second semester in mid-February. Teachers took their students to the library, where the librarians had prepared a short presentation/orientation explaining the competition to the students and showing them where the books were. The librarians had asked for class lists in advance to register the students in SRC or MReader, but due to many class changes, this proved not an effective strategy, so if it takes a few weeks for class lists to settle at an institution, it is better to start the competition in week 3 or 4 of the semester.

One other significant change in the Reading Challenge from the trial was that a weekly leaderboard was sent from the library to teachers to share with students showing the number of words read for each class in each level and the top reader in each class. At the teacher and student follow-up interviews, this proved to be a very successful motivational strategy. Gustafson (2008) used a visual strategy, showing a weekly reading graph, to turn around her middle-school reading competition when the boys won the first three months, and then later seemed to lose interest.

Data Collection

Data was collected from the participating students using an online survey at the end of the semester. In the online student survey, 83 student responses were collected from 179 participants in the Reading Challenge. The students responded to 10 Likert-scale items with four alternative responses, Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree and three open-ended items. The survey items were in both Arabic and English, and open-ended questions were translated into English for analysis. Focus group interviews were held with six participating classes to validate the survey. (The two

researchers' classes did not participate in the focus group interviews.) In addition, guided interviews were held with six of the participating teachers.

A pre-pilot survey administered in 2011 at the same college found that 67% of the respondents read no more than two books per month. This was an improvement on the findings of Johnson in a 2009 survey in the same college which "showed that 65% of the students surveyed almost never did any kind of reading" (Johnson, 2009, p. 106). Teachers who were interviewed at the end of the program stated that before the Reading Challenge, their students did not read graded readers in their classes because there was no time to cover them, and that the students did not understand them or understand how to use the library. These findings confirm the concerns of many teachers in the region and reaffirm the need for motivating reluctant readers.

First Language English (L1) Reading Motivational Framework

In an attempt to reflect the multifaceted nature of reading motivation, Wigfield and Guthrie (1995, cited in Mori, 2002) divided L1 reading motivation into three dimensions: Competence and Reading Efficacy, Achievement Values and Goals, and Social Aspects of Reading. These categories in turn entail 11 sub-components (see Table 1). Although the framework was created for use with L1 students, Mori's (2002) results suggested that there was a connection between L1 and L2 (second language Japanese) reading motivation.

Table 1: Wigfield and Guthrie Reading Motivational Framework (cited in Harris, 2009)

Competence and Reading Efficacy	(1) **reading efficacy** – individual's sense of self-esteem and beliefs about their ability
	(2) **Reading Challenge** – the satisfaction of understanding complicated ideas in the text
	(3) **reading work avoidance** – refers to aspects of reading the reader dislikes
Achievement Values and Goals (divided into Intrinsic motivation	**Intrinsic motivation**

and Extrinsic motivation)	(4) **reading curiosity** – the desire to learn about a certain idea
	(5) **reading involvement** – the enjoyment involved in reading different kinds of text
	(6) **importance of reading** – beliefs and feelings towards reading based on past experiences
	Extrinsic motivation
	(7) **competition in reading** – concerned with an individual's attempt to outperform others in reading
	(8) **reading recognition** – tangible forms of recognition such as teacher or peer approval
	(9) **reading for grades** – the teacher's evaluation of learners' reading performance
Social Aspects of Reading	(10) **social reasons for reading** – share the meanings of the text with significant others
	(11) **reading compliance** – the kind of reading required by the teacher

Items in the online student survey were devised in an attempt to determine if students' intrinsic motivation levels increased their achievement values and goals as defined by Wigfield and Guthrie's (1995) L1 reading motivational framework, but items also included in the survey attempted to determine students' motivation levels relative to Competence and Reading Efficacy and Social Aspects of Reading. Table 2 depicts the distribution of the survey items.

Table 2: Student Online Survey Questions and L1 Reading Motivation Framework

Survey Item	Sub-component of L1 Reading Motivational Framework
1.The Reading Challenge encouraged me to read more	(7) Competition in reading
2. I read books only when I was with my teacher	(8) Recognition for reading
3. I read books on my own at home or outside college	(1) Reading efficacy
4. I love reading	(6) Importance of reading
5. Reading books helps me to improve my English language	(1) Reading efficacy
6. I will continue to read books on my own	(6) Importance of reading
7. I took quizzes on books I didn't read	(9) Reading for grades

8. I like reading more now than I did before	(6) Importance of reading
9. I read the whole book before doing the quizzes	(9) Reading for grades
10. All students should participate in the Reading Challenge	(10) Social aspects of reading
11. Winning the Reading Challenge motivated me to read	(7) Competition in reading

Results

The student survey items revealed that a high number of students identified the importance of reading (sub-component 6). Eight-four per cent of the students claimed they loved reading after the Reading Challenge, and 71% said they would continue to read books on their own, suggesting that the Reading Challenge had played a part in increasing their Achievement Values and Goals because post-Reading Challenge students seemed to have more positive beliefs and feelings towards reading.

Further evidence of increased intrinsic motivation became apparent through the student focus groups. Participants mentioned that

"stories are interesting"

"you want to know what happens next"

"it's different from reading for information"

The Reading Challenge piqued their reading curiosity (sub-component 4) as they had the desire to learn about certain ideas in the books. Students in the focus group described the kinds of books they wanted to see in the library. Many wanted more Arab culture and history graded readers in the library. This provides evidence of reading involvement (sub-component 5) because students claimed that they enjoyed reading different kinds of text.

Evidence that students had discovered the importance of reading (sub-component 6) was shown in the responses to the open-ended question, "How can we make the Reading Challenge better?" The most frequent answers were related to increasing the

number of reading hours or time for reading: students wanted to read more because they had realized for themselves the benefits of reading and had enjoyed the experience at the same time.

Other questions in the survey also elicited the extent to which extrinsic motivation had been instrumental in "kick starting" (Johnson, 2009, p.109) the program. Using extrinsic rewards is often thought to be detrimental to intrinsic motivation, but under certain conditions external rewards may be needed to ignite the spark or introduce students to the task where they have no initial interest and when the task may seem difficult (Marinak & Grambell, 2008). The competition aspect of the Reading Challenge proved to be the leading motivating factor for our students who come from a society where where there is not a habit of reading perhaps because of the prized oral tradition (Shannon, 2003).

Referring back to Wigfield and Guthrie's (1995) L1 reading motivational framework and the student survey, 87% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that the Reading Challenge encouraged them to read more, and 82% agreed or strongly agreed that the idea of actually winning the Reading Challenge motivated them to read more (sub-component 7). (The teacher interviews verified these points as some teachers were surprised by how motivating the competition was.) When students were asked, "What was your favorite part of the Reading Challenge?" the most frequent answer given was the "challenge" or the "competition."

Most of the students involved with the program were concerned with outperforming others in scoring the highest number of points for the total amount of words read, and this spurred them on to read more, giving them an opportunity, yet again, to discover for themselves the benefits of reading and that they could read books at

different levels. The competitive aspect of the program was instrumental in getting the students on board and on their way to acquiring positive beliefs and feelings towards reading, thus turning reluctant readers into intrinsically motivated readers.

Competence and Reading Efficacy

Student survey results showed that 66% of the students read books on their own outside college, and more interestingly 94% of the students believed that reading books had improved their English. Students felt good about their achievements and thus wanted to read more.

We also asked students on the survey and in the focus groups which area of their English they thought had improved the most due to the Reading Challenge. The self-reported top answer was vocabulary with 65 responses (82.3%), and the second highest response was spelling with 56 responses (70.9%) (Table 3). The student focus groups validated the reliability of this response.

Table 3: The Reading Challenge Helped Improve

Skill	Total	Percent
Vocabulary	65	82.3%
Reading Speed	49	62%
Comprehension	51	64.6%
Grammar	47	59.5%
Spelling	56	70.9%
Writing	44	55.7%

Social Aspects of Reading

In focus group interviews with students and individual interviews with teachers, students and teachers all stated that students enjoyed teacher involvement (sub-component 10) and found this highly motivational. This involvement ranged from teachers taking students to the library, sitting with students and discussing the book, modeling reading, paying attention to the number of books each student had read, to just walking around in the library watching them read and asking them about their reading. Students were very keen to share the meanings of the text with teachers and classmates to the extent that in the interviews, teachers complained that too many students were telling their friends the answers to the quizzes. Some students also thought that this

was a problem especially with books based on movies that students had seen. These were identified as motivating social factors, although some of them were not desirable.

The student survey asked students if they thought that all students should participate in the Reading Challenge, and 80% agreed that they should. Teachers also agreed in individual interviews that all students would be motivated to take part in another Reading Challenge, albeit with some adjustments to the program to address the issues related to students sharing answers to questions.

Motivation through reading compliance (sub-component 11) was achieved because students understood that the teacher required them to be involved in the extensive reading program. Teachers believed that students took part initially because they wanted to please the teacher.

Conclusion

We believe that the Reading Challenge, with its competitive format and symbolic rewards, led our students to discover for themselves the benefits of reading and then the enjoyment. Thus, we used extrinsic motivation to initiate an interest reading, which we hope will lead to the development of intrinsic motivation in which students value reading for its own sake. In our opinion, our students will not buy into a reading program from the start unless they are extrinsically motivated, and the awarding of symbolic rather than tangible rewards or force (counting as part of the students' grades) reduced the incidence of avoidance strategies. Teachers need to sell the idea of reading and use various social and competitive factors to motivate students. Our campus has decided to implement the competition across all levels of the Foundations language program involving all teachers and students due to the results of our research. A challenge for us will be achieving buy in from all teachers to support the Reading Challenge.

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