Motivating Reluctant Readers to Read: What Works

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Abstract
Getting students to read is often an uphill battle for teachers, particularly in gulf countries where a culture of reading is not usually present at home (Kandil 2001; Shannon 2003). This paper will introduce ways in which teachers can motivate gulf learners and other reluctant readers to engage in extensive reading, an approach that has been shown to improve reading skills and overall language proficiency (Nakanishi 2014; Grabe, 2009; Day & Bamford, 1998). First, drawing on original research conducted in a university foundation program in the UAE, the presenter will discuss how the M-reader online extensive reading tool has been used successfully to motivate Emirati learners to read. The research highlights the particular aspects of the extensive reading program, which students have reported as most personally motivating for their extensive reading practices. Next, the concept of teacher "co-reading," in which teachers read their own books alongside students will be explained. Thirdly, the paper will discuss how the use of audio support can be an effective motivating tool for struggling readers. Fourth, the strategy of reframing the task of reading for students as way to motivate them will be explored. Finally, the paper will explain how culture can be used as a tool to increase reading motivation among gulf learners and other reluctant readers in different cultural contexts.

1. Introduction
Every language educator knows how vital reading is to education. Moreover, Grabe (2009) asserts that the skill is not just limited to the classroom but to the wider world as "citizens of modern societies must be good readers to be successful" (p. 5). Reading is, in fact, one of the most important language skills in an academic setting and the cornerstone of success at school, work and in society (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2009). In the Arabian Gulf, this presents teachers with a formidable challenge as students often lack the habit of reading (O'Sullivan, 2009; Kandil, 2001; Shannon, 2003). However, reluctant readers are not just limited to gulf countries; they can be found in classrooms around the world. This paper focuses on what teachers can do in language classrooms to help such readers engage with reading.

2. Extensive Reading
The applied linguistics literature offers a helpful approach toward improving the reading skills of students and that is *extensive reading*. Extensive reading, of course, is the practice of having students read large quantities of easily comprehensible books of their own choosing (Day & Bamford, 1998). For students of English, these books often come in the form of graded readers, which are texts made accessible to them and set to their L2 reading level. Research support for extensive reading is robust and strongly suggests that the practice leads to a host of linguistic benefits such as improved reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, writing, spelling and even speaking skills (Nakanishi, 2014; Krashen, 2004; Day & Bamford, 1998). Perhaps this is because, as Eskey & Grabe (1998) explain, "people learn to read by reading, not by doing exercises" (p.228). Moreover, it is even believed that fluent reading comprehension skills cannot be developed in the absence of extensive reading (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). Most importantly for reluctant readers, however, is the finding that extensive reading actually increases student motivation to continue reading (Day & Bamford, 1998).

3. M-reader
In the university foundation program, where the author teaches, extensive reading has been used in conjunction with the free online tool, M-reader, and has resulted in great success. The website, developed by Dr. Thomas Robb from Kyoto Sangyo University in Japan, consists of a database of online quizzes tied to the graded reader books found in the libraries of many universities and schools. Students receive points for each book quiz they pass and have their own webpage where they can track their extensive reading activities. Teachers can also track the extensive reading activities of their students and the website automatically grades quizzes and allocates a number of points for each quiz

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passed. An international leaderboard is also a feature of the site whereby students can compete with other English language learning readers from around the world. M-reader effectively "gamifies" the extensive reading experience for students, providing extrinsive motivation to read.

Feedback from students about M-reader has been overwhelmingly positive at the university where the author teaches in the UAE. M-reader was initially incorperated into the curriculum programwide in the Fall of 2014. As a result, tens of millions of words were read by the 945 students in the program, with the average student having read 66,064 words and an average of 10.8 graded reader books during a 10-week timeframe. Not only were the statistics encouraging, but so was the qualitiative feedback from students. Students (n=254) reported that they believed that M-reader improved their English (93%); helped them to read faster (88%); and that it made reading more fun (69%). Reading teachers (n=28) too, found M-reader to be beneficial for their students (82%), wished to continue with it (82%), and 86% of them believed that the tool motivated some students to read who would not normally read, thereby highlighting its success with the most reluctant of readers.

In fact, since then, the author has conducted research into student and teacher attitudes toward M-reader every semester and the feedback has continued to be overwhelmingly positive from both students and teachers alike. At the end of the Fall 2015 semester, the author again surveyed over 900 students in the same university intensive English program and only 12.4% of these reading resistant students reported disliking M-reader (n=290), with an overwhelming 87.6% of students reporting that they found M-reader helpful and motivating. One statistic which offers some of the strongest support of the tool is the fact that 33.8% of survey respondents reported: "If there is no M-reader, I will not read" – a very powerful endorsement indeed. Most recently, in the Spring 2016 semester, 27% of students (n=79) reported that it was the "game" aspect of the website that they found most motivating; the way that the website layout helped to organize their time (18%), & the visualization of seeing the books they'd read on their webpage (15%). Whatever each student's individual reason for liking M-reader, it has been clear that it indeed works for them.

4. Teacher Co-Reading

While implementing extensive reading alongside M-reader is a great start, there are other approaches teachers can use in the classroom to get reluctant readers excited about reading. One of these, the author refers to as teacher "co-reading." The practice involves having the teacher do his or her own extensive reading alongside students, who are busily engaged in their own graded reader books. The way that the activity works is that students, as a class, first decide on a novel or popular book for the teacher to read and then the teacher provides an oral summary of a book chapter to the class on a weekly basis. In an FL setting, where students come from a similar cultural background and the teacher may come from a different one, teacher co-reading appears to work quite well since the book chosen can be from the students' culture and therefore can simultaneously facilitate a cultural exchange. At the end of each week, after the teacher gives a short oral presentation summarizing the contents of the chapter, both students and the teacher have an opportunity to ask questions, sharing and clarifying aspects of the story and cultural practices. During this time, the teacher is able to model his/her own passion for reading for students, providing them with a positive reading experience example. For reluctant readers, this is especially important in rebuilding the negative associations they often have with reading. As students start to recognize the positive reactions of their teacher about not only reading, but also about their culture, it motivates them to view reading in a new light and attempt it themselves. This response of students should not be all that surprising as Dörnyei (2005) explains, "the teacher's motivation has significant bearings on the students' motivational disposition and, more generally, on their learning achievement" (p.116).

5. Audio Support

Yet another method of reaching the reading-resistant population is through the use of audio support alongside reading. Randall (2009) explains that this method is beneficial since it provides learners with aural support to help with the visual processing of vocabulary words. Nutall (2005) suggests that listening along with the text improves speed and comprehension for slow readers and may ignite a love for reading. Nowadays, graded readers often come with an mp3 version, which students can easily listen to as their eyes follow along with the words on the page. By encouraging reluctant readers to "just listen to a story in English" (particularly on a subject that they are already interested in) and, as an add-on, try following along by looking at the words on the page, students are less resistant toward reading as they might have been otherwise. Students of every cultural background enjoy listening to stories, particularly reading resistant gulf learners. Teachers can even allow their most reluctant readers to give an oral report in class (instead of a written summary) or have them share the stories from their books with classmates in reading discussion groups.

6. Reframing: From task to ideas

Another strategy teachers can use with reading resistant students involves shifting the focus from reading being a "task" that students must complete to one about "ideas." Many reluctant readers associate reading with unpleasant schoolwork. Reading is something their teachers force them to do in school. Teachers can re-frame their approach to reading in order to change attitudes. Rather than saying things to students like, "Did you read your books this week?" "If you want to pass, you have to read at least 2 books every week" "You have to read this text because it will be on the test" etc; the questions from the teacher can instead become things like, "Did you find any interesting books to read?" "What kind of books do you like?" "What happened in the story?" "Tell me about the things you learned." To transform the negative associations into positive ones, the focus needs to shift for students. At the end of the day, reading is essentially just a vehicle for getting at new ideas. Everyone, no matter who they are, is interested in something. Identifying that interest of the reluctant reader and then getting them to make the realization that reading is just a method of getting more information about the thing they are interested in, makes reading much more appealing to them.

7. Use Culture as Tool

Finally, good language educators intuitively know how important it is to pay careful attention to the context that students are in as "language learning emerges from participation in linguistic practices, such practices always been steeped in historical, cultural, and institutional meaning systems" (van Lier, 2004, p.88). Such an understanding of the cultural context can lead to better outcomes in all aspects of language learning for students. In the UAE, where the author teaches, Emirati students have an extremely high regard for the political leaders of the nation and have a strong desire to help the country. Therefore, anytime the teacher wants to advocate reading, an effective method is to always align their words with the views of local political leaders by sharing their words about the importance of reading for citizens and showing photos of events such as local book fairs where they have made appearences. This has shown to be an extremely effective practice in the UAE classroom. By understanding the particular culture and motivations of students wherever they are, teachers can learn to 'speak their language' to find them where they are and get them involved in reading.

8. Conclusion

While teaching reading can often be an uphill battle for educators of reluctant readers, the task can be made easier and more successful by a targeted approach, making use of a number tools and motivational strategies. By encouraging extensive reading, making use of highly motivating tools such as M-reader, and rebuilding negative associations with reading through strategies such as teacher co-reading, audio support, and re-focusing the task of reading for students, teachers can become more successful. Understanding the cultural motivations of students too, can also be of benefit in getting reluctant readers to engage with reading.

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