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# Motivation matters: Factors that affect the reading motivation of English learners

by Dr. Selena Protacio

Nabila came to Michigan from Afghanistan as a refugee and entered second grade not knowing any English. Fortunately for Nabila, her teachers not only worked with her on her English language skills, but also inspired her to have a love of reading. I first met Nabila when she was a sixth grader who was a very motivated reader. When I revisited Nabila again in the eighth grade, she was still motivated, but her reasons for reading had changed.

Nabila's story is a success in that she came to this country as a newcomer and emerged as both a proficient reader and motivated reader. However, not all English learners (ELs) have this experience, and teachers understand the challenge of teaching ELs to be both proficient and motivated readers. Unfortunately, there is a limited amount of research on ELs' reading motivation as most motivation research has focused on native-English speakers. However, we cannot assume that what motivates native-English speakers to read in English will also be the same for ELs, especially since they come to school with a variety of experiences in terms of their culture, language, and formal schooling. We need to think about how to increase and maintain the reading motivation of the estimated 4.8 million ELs in U.S. public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

Previous research indicates a relationship between reading motivation and reading achievement (Morgan & Fuchs, 2007). This relationship is especially pertinent to ELs, as they continue to score lower than their native-English speaking peers on the reading portions of standardized assessments, according to the 2017 *Nation's Report Card*. For instance, ELs and native English speakers scored 189 and 226 respectively at the fourth-grade level while eighth graders scored 226 and 269 respectively, and these differences are statistically significant. These results are unsurprising considering



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the "double burden" (Short & Fitzsimmons, 2007) that ELs have. While they are learning the English language or learning academic English, ELs must learn the same content as their native English-speaking peers (Goldenberg, 2008). It is crucial that we focus on ELs' reading motivation as a potential avenue to improve their reading achievement. In this article, I will discuss factors that matter in order to cultivate and maintain the reading motivation of English learners. All of the examples presented in this article are based on my various case studies with ELs in Michigan schools (e.g., Protacio, 2012, 2017).

## Home Matters

Practitioners must consider that home literacy practices of ELs may be vastly different from those of the mainstream. While English-speaking, mainstream families may engage in practices such as reading bedtime stories or regular trips to the public library, ELs coming

from non-mainstream homes may not engage in such practices, although certainly some do. In reality, for some ELs, it is the school setting where they are first immersed in a print-rich environment.

Schools can encourage the participation of ELs and their families in more non-traditional ways. For instance, upon moving to the U.S., one Chinese family required their son to read in English 30 to 45 minutes a day. This boy, who was initially an unmotivated reader, found his niche while complying with his parents' demand that he read every day. Others have also found that while immigrant parents themselves may not read, they are likely to encourage their children to read and pass on the value of the importance of education (Loera, Rueda, & Nakamoto, 2011).

Some immigrant parents may not be fluent in English; however, they may be avid readers in their native language. A fifth grader whose family was originally from Iraq recalled in an interview that he saw his father reading in Arabic every night. Immigrant parents do not necessarily have to be reading in English to have an impact on their children's reading motivation. Schools can encourage immigrant parents to continue to be reading role models to their children, regardless of the language in which they read.

Parental involvement in U.S. mainstream society may be thought of as "reading to your child." Yet, we have to think of different ways in which we could partner with immigrant families to work hand in hand with the goal of increasing ELs' reading motivation.

### **Interactions Matter**

Social motivation can be very important in helping ELs become more motivated to read in English. Reading in English could be a way for ELs to establish connections and interact with their peers. Moving to a new school is intimidating enough, but imagine moving to a new school in a new country! Reading the same texts as their native-English speaking peers can give ELs a common experience to which they could bond with their new peers. One student recalled how he read the same books

as his peers, and he liked to start conversations with someone reading the same book or series.

Conversely, students' social groups could also dissuade them from reading. One student who had moved to Michigan from Japan was an avid reader in her native country. She and her friends loved to talk about the Japanese texts they were reading. However, when she moved to Michigan, none of her new friends loved to read. Thus, she did not want to read English texts since she had no American peers with whom to discuss them. Another EL from Afghanistan admitted that he and his friends did not read. They would rather spend their time watching movies or shopping at the mall.

Social motivation is extremely important to reading motivation because it fosters connections with peers who validate and help make meaning from reading. However, for ELs, finding opportunities to engage in social interactions around text may be difficult. For instance, in one of my research studies, a Muslim student was an avid reader, yet she was ostracized by her mainstream peers (Protacio, 2017). Even though she wanted to participate in social interactions around reading, her pool of peers with whom she could engage in book discussions was quite limited. Therefore, teachers need to create those social organizations and communities in which ELs can talk and share what they like about reading (e.g., book clubs, book talks).

### **Self-Efficacy Matters**

ELs face many challenges such as having to learn the English language while concurrently learning the academic content in their classrooms (Goldenberg, 2008). An EL originally from Lebanon recalled that when he first started learning how to read in English in the first grade, he felt stupid because the letters looked like a bunch of squiggles to him. Fortunately, his school had an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher who worked diligently with him on both his oral language and literacy abilities. By fifth grade, he was at the top of his class. While this represents a success story, it certainly does not reflect the reality of all ELs who come to the U.S. with limited English skills. Schools have an

obligation to provide ELs with the necessary services to help them become more proficient in all aspects of English—speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

There are one too many stories of ELs being put in special education because some schools think that is where ELs can get the most help, especially for schools that only have a few ELs and no ESL teacher. But schools must understand this is doing ELs a great disservice since the needs of ELs are vastly different from those of special education students. As another example, a teacher in one of my graduate classes teaches in a rural school district with primarily Caucasian students. However, after winter break, a new student enrolled in their district—a boy from China who had limited English skills. As the reading specialist at the school, she was trying to help the classroom teacher figure out ways to help this student. But most of the day he sat in the teacher's classroom with an electronic translator. Let us take a minute to put ourselves in this student's shoes. How would this affect our self-efficacy as a learner? It would be like watching a foreign movie all day without subtitles. How motivated would you be if you were this student?

It is clear that in order to address ELs' reading motivation, we must help them become readers of English texts. ELs need to feel they can be successful readers of English texts and members of English-speaking learning communities. A caveat to consider is the types of texts we have ELs read. Cho, Xu, and Rhodes (2010) found that fourth grade ELs in their study who scored below the 25th percentile on a standardized test were more likely to be motivated to read texts when they were given ones that were moderately challenging. In other words, these ELs, who scored fairly low on a standardized test, wanted to be exposed to interesting, albeit challenging texts rather than texts that were too simple. Providing ELs with moderately challenging texts on topics of interest would not only benefit their motivation, but it would also help in possibly improving their reading proficiency. In addition, ELs need exposure to more authentic, meaningful reading (Li & Zhang, 2004) rather than rote, boring reading activities.

## **Choice Matters**

We know that students are more likely to be motivated to read when they are given choices. As Guthrie and Klauda (2012) explain, students do not have to be given complete free rein in choosing what to read. Students could be asked to choose a section of a text to read, or they could choose a text they would prefer to read from a list of supplementary materials.

All students, not just ELs, need time to read something of their own choosing (Allington & Gabriel, 2012). Thus, students need access to texts in their classrooms that they want to read. We also need to consider that ELs may want to read books that cover diverse perspectives. Teachers should examine their classroom libraries. Will ELs be able to see themselves represented in the book or text options in the library? Are they able to find “mirrors” (Sims Bishop, 1990) in the texts available to them in schools? On a related note, are they exposed to “windows” so they can learn about diverse perspectives and expand their world views (Sims Bishop, 1990)? In addition, teachers can consider adding dual-language texts as another choice for ELs so they can read both in English and their native language.

Providing students choices is not centered only around reading materials. ELs should also have choices in how they demonstrate understanding of their learning. For instance, ELs who are still developing as writers may not be able to express their comprehension through a traditional essay. Having options such as making a visual representation (e.g., poster) could be an alternative assignment for ELs to express their ideas as they are continuing to hone their English writing skills. They may also be more motivated to create such projects rather than being required to write traditional papers. Teachers who are uncomfortable with giving complete freedom of choice in the classroom can provide a limited set of choices to students for final products on a unit. One teacher shared that she creates tic-tac-toe boards wherein students are given nine choices, and they need to choose three of those tasks for a given curricular unit.

## Value Matters

ELs must be clear in their understanding that learning how to read in English and actually reading in English are going to help them become more successful in U.S. schools. It is crucial that ELs realize that the more they read, the more they understand. In a previous article (Protacio, 2012), I describe how ELs who are motivated to read understand the value of reading. For instance, one student explicitly mentioned that as she read more, she was able to find out how to improve her writing abilities. Another student recognized his vocabulary increased from reading. As a counter example, a middle school EL from Afghanistan declared he did not read because it was not relevant to his career aspirations of becoming an actor. When he was told that he would actually have to read a lot of scripts if he wanted to land acting jobs, he began to participate in classroom discussions about reading.

In short, ELs have to understand why reading is important and how it could help them with their academics or their future careers. Having to learn to read in another language may be a challenging, tedious process for many ELs in U.S. schools, particularly for those who arrive with limited literacy abilities in their first language. It is important for ELs to know why reading in English is beneficial so they can be motivated to work harder at overcoming the initial challenges.

## Teachers Matter

Earlier in the article, I described the experiences of a Lebanese student who had made great strides in terms of his English proficiency and literacy abilities thanks to the commitment of his ESL teacher. Undoubtedly, teachers can have an impact on ELs' development as readers, but I want to emphasize how teachers have an impact on ELs' development as motivated readers.

At the beginning of this article, I introduced readers to Nabila. She recalled that her teachers were the ones who initially motivated her to read. They first gave her picture books, and then as her literacy skills improved, helped her find texts that were at her independent reading level. She shared that aside from her friends,

her teachers and the school librarian were able to recommend books that she enjoyed reading. Another EL shared that he initially did not know how to choose good books. His teacher modeled for him how to look over the book's blurb, skim the first few pages, and use the catalog through the library's website. His teacher's scaffolding strategies allowed this EL to become more adept at choosing books that he would most likely enjoy, rather than picking up the first book he came upon, which is what he was initially doing.

Teachers can also inspire ELs to become motivated readers. One way to do so would be to determine ELs' reading interests through an interest inventory (e.g., McKenna & Stahl, 2009). An interest inventory is a list of topics from which ELs can indicate what they would like to read. For ELs with limited English proficiency, teachers can adapt the interest survey by using pictures so students could better indicate which ones are topics of interest. By examining the interest inventory, teachers can recommend books or texts that ELs would likely enjoy reading.

## Conclusion: ELs Matter

This article provided several areas which "matter" when motivating ELs to read in English. However, it is equally important that schools, their policies, teachers, and administrators understand that "ELs Matter." Each EL brings a wealth of experiences and linguistic knowledge that can be tapped and used to address their reading motivation. What I hope this article underscores is the importance of thinking of ways to specifically address and increase ELs' motivation to read in English.

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