

Using Reading-Based Tasks to Foster Motivation in English Language among Learners

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Abstract

Motivation remains one of the most significant determinants of success in foreign language acquisition. Despite its recognized importance, many English language learners struggle with sustaining engagement over time, particularly in contexts where exposure to authentic language use is limited. This paper investigates the role of reading-based tasks in fostering and sustaining motivation among English language learners (ELLs) at secondary and tertiary levels. Drawing on self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), the involvement load hypothesis (Hulstijn & Laufer, 2001), and extensive reading research (Krashen, 2004), the study argues that carefully designed reading tasks — encompassing pre-reading activation, interactive while-reading activities, and reflective post-reading discussion — can significantly enhance intrinsic motivation, promote vocabulary acquisition, and support learner autonomy. The paper reviews empirical evidence from a range of classroom-based studies and proposes a practical pedagogical framework for integrating motivating reading tasks into English language instruction. Findings suggest that when learners are given agency in text selection, exposed to comprehensible yet challenging input, and provided with collaborative task structures, their motivation and overall language proficiency improve measurably. Implications for curriculum design and teacher professional development are also discussed.

Keywords: reading-based tasks, learner motivation, English language learning, intrinsic motivation, extensive reading, self-determination theory, task-based language teaching, learner autonomy, vocabulary acquisition, EFL/ESL pedagogy

Introduction

Motivation in language learning has long been recognized as a driving force behind learner achievement, persistence, and overall proficiency development. While the cognitive and linguistic dimensions of second language acquisition (SLA) have received considerable scholarly attention, the affective dimension — and in particular the role of motivation — continues to occupy a central place in both theoretical and applied linguistics (Dörnyei, 2001; Gardner, 1985). Among the various instructional tools available to teachers of English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL), reading-based tasks present a particularly rich and underutilized resource for motivating learners and sustaining their engagement with the target language.

Reading in a second language is far more than a passive receptive skill. When structured through purposeful pedagogical tasks, reading becomes an active meaning-making process through which learners engage with vocabulary, grammar, cultural content, and discourse patterns in authentic and meaningful ways. The challenge, however, lies in designing reading tasks that are motivating rather than demotivating — tasks that strike the appropriate balance between challenge and accessibility, autonomy and guidance, individual effort and collaborative engagement.

This article seeks to address the following questions: (1) What theoretical frameworks help explain the relationship between reading-based tasks and learner motivation? (2) What types of reading tasks have been shown empirically to enhance motivation among English language learners? (3) How can teachers design and implement reading-based task sequences that systematically foster motivation across different proficiency levels? In pursuing these questions, the paper draws on a synthesis of current research in SLA, motivational psychology, and reading pedagogy, and proposes a coherent framework for classroom practice.

1. Theoretical Framework

Several theoretical perspectives provide the conceptual foundation for understanding why and how reading-based tasks can foster motivation in language learners.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000), distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and identifies three basic psychological needs — autonomy, competence, and relatedness — whose satisfaction is essential for sustained motivated behavior. In language learning contexts, intrinsic motivation — which arises from genuine interest, curiosity, and enjoyment — has been consistently associated with greater depth of processing, better retention, and higher levels of achievement (Noels et al., 2000). Reading tasks that allow learners to choose texts aligned with their personal interests, engage with challenging but manageable content, and work collaboratively with peers address all three psychological needs identified by SDT, thus supporting intrinsic motivation.

Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985) posits that language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to input that is slightly beyond their current level of competence — what Krashen famously termed «i+1.» Reading offers a natural and controllable vehicle for delivering comprehensible input, particularly when graded readers, simplified texts, or scaffolded authentic materials are employed. When learners encounter texts at an appropriate level of difficulty, they experience a sense of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) — a state of optimal engagement that is closely linked to intrinsic motivation. Texts that are either too simple (producing boredom) or too difficult (producing anxiety) undermine motivation and impede acquisition.

The Involvement Load Hypothesis, proposed by Hulstijn and Laufer (2001), offers a useful framework for understanding how specific task characteristics affect the depth of vocabulary processing and, by extension, learner engagement. The hypothesis identifies three components of involvement — need, search, and evaluation — and argues that tasks requiring higher involvement load lead to deeper processing and better retention of new lexical items. Reading tasks that ask learners to infer meaning from context, use new vocabulary in production, or evaluate textual claims create high involvement conditions that make the learning experience feel effortful yet rewarding, thereby supporting motivational persistence.

Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System (2009) adds an identity dimension to the analysis of motivation. According to this framework, motivated language learning is driven by learners' visions of their ideal L2 selves — the imagined future version of themselves who speaks English fluently and uses it purposefully. Reading tasks that connect to learners' aspirations, expose them to cultural and professional contexts they find personally relevant, and allow them to see themselves as competent readers of English contribute to the construction and maintenance of a positive ideal L2 self.

2. Reading-Based Tasks: Types and Motivational Potential

Reading-based tasks exist along a spectrum from purely receptive activities to highly interactive, production-oriented ones. Research suggests that tasks positioned toward the interactive end of this spectrum tend to generate higher levels of learner motivation and engagement (Willis, 1996; Nation, 2009).

Extensive Reading (ER) programs represent one of the most empirically supported approaches to motivating EFL/ESL learners through reading. In an ER program, learners read large quantities of self-selected texts at or slightly below their proficiency level, with the primary goal of enjoyment and meaning rather than linguistic analysis. Studies by Day and Bamford (1998) and Yamashita (2004) demonstrate that ER programs consistently produce gains not only in reading fluency, vocabulary, and general language proficiency, but also in learner attitudes toward reading and toward English more broadly. The element of choice is especially significant: when learners select their own reading materials, they experience

greater ownership over the learning process, which supports autonomous motivation.

Task-Based Reading Activities involve learners in completing meaningful real-world tasks using written texts as the primary source of information. Such tasks might include reading a set of reviews and deciding which restaurant to visit, reading a news article and preparing a brief oral report, or reading a scientific passage and designing a response to a problem it poses. Willis and Willis (2007) argue that task-based approaches are motivating precisely because they give reading a genuine communicative purpose: learners read not to answer comprehension questions at the end of a chapter, but to accomplish something they perceive as meaningful. This sense of purpose is a powerful motivational force.

Jigsaw Reading is a cooperative learning technique in which different learners or groups are given different portions of a text and must share the information they have obtained in order to complete a unified task. This structure is motivating for several reasons: it creates genuine information gaps that learners are motivated to fill, promotes peer interaction and collaborative meaning-making, and assigns each learner a valued role within the group (Aronson & Patnoe, 1997). Research in EFL contexts has shown that jigsaw reading tasks produce higher levels of engagement and information retention than individual reading followed by whole-class discussion (Jacobs & Gallo, 2002).

Reader Response Tasks invite learners to engage personally and critically with texts, expressing their opinions, emotional reactions, and connections to their own experience. Rather than treating texts as vehicles for discrete language points, reader response approaches treat them as provocations for thought and dialogue. Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading (1978) provides the theoretical basis for this approach: meaning is understood to emerge from the dynamic interaction between reader and text, and different readers construct different but equally valid interpretations. In EFL contexts, reader response tasks — such as literature circles, reading journals, and structured discussion protocols — have been shown to increase reading motivation, particularly among adolescent learners who may otherwise find English classes disconnected from their personal lives (Grabe, 2009).

3. Pedagogical Framework for Motivating Reading Tasks

Drawing on the theoretical and empirical foundations reviewed above, the following three-phase framework is proposed for designing motivating reading task sequences.

Phase 1: Pre-Reading Activation. The pre-reading phase is crucial for establishing motivation before learners encounter the text. Effective pre-reading activities serve several motivational functions: they activate learners' prior knowledge, create curiosity about the text's content, and help learners set reading purposes. Activities such as KWL charts (Know – Want to know – Learned), visual prediction tasks, and anticipation guides have been shown to increase reading motivation by engaging learners' existing schemata and arousing their interest (Graves & Graves, 2003). Crucially, allowing learners to choose among several texts or genres during this

phase contributes to the sense of autonomy that SDT identifies as central to intrinsic motivation.

Phase 2: While-Reading Tasks. During reading, tasks should engage learners actively with the text without reducing it to a series of comprehension exercises. Annotation tasks, graphic organizer completion, selective underlining with justification, and collaborative reading with structured discussion stops all require learners to interact meaningfully with content. These activities create conditions of high involvement load as described by Hulstijn and Laufer (2001), encouraging learners to search for meaning, evaluate information, and process vocabulary at a deeper level. Teachers should also be mindful of pacing: providing adequate time for reading without time pressure reduces anxiety and allows the kind of relaxed concentration that is associated with intrinsic engagement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Phase 3: Post-Reading Production and Reflection. Post-reading tasks that invite learners to use the text as a springboard for their own ideas — through writing, discussion, debate, creative response, or project work — complete the motivational cycle. When learners can see their reading as a resource for their own communicative purposes rather than an end in itself, they develop a more positive and utilitarian orientation toward reading in English. Research by Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) in the context of Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI) demonstrates that combining reading with conceptual learning goals and real-world application significantly increases reading motivation across diverse learner populations.

Discussion

The evidence reviewed in this paper converges on a consistent finding: reading-based tasks, when carefully designed and implemented, have significant potential to foster motivation in English language learners. However, several important conditions must be in place for this potential to be realized.

First, text selection is critical. Texts must be appropriately leveled, thematically engaging, and — where possible — chosen by or in consultation with learners themselves. The one-size-fits-all approach of many commercial textbooks, which provide a single text for all learners regardless of their interests or reading levels, runs counter to the motivational principles established by SDT and extensive reading research.

Second, teacher attitude and enthusiasm for reading play a significant mediating role. Research consistently shows that teachers who model reading behavior, share their own reading experiences, and communicate genuine enthusiasm for texts are more successful in fostering reading motivation than those who treat reading as a purely instructional tool (Day & Bamford, 1998).

Third, assessment practices must be aligned with motivational goals. If reading tasks are ultimately assessed through traditional comprehension tests that prioritize recall over

interpretation and engagement, learners will quickly orient toward extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivation. Portfolio-based assessment, reading journals, and peer discussion rubrics offer more motivationally congruent alternatives.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that reading-based tasks, grounded in theoretically robust frameworks and implemented through motivationally sensitive pedagogical sequences, represent a powerful vehicle for fostering motivation among English language learners. By drawing on self-determination theory, the involvement load hypothesis, and extensive reading research, and by designing task sequences that address the pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading phases, teachers can create learning environments in which reading in English is experienced not as an obligation, but as a genuinely engaging, rewarding, and personally meaningful activity. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies that track motivational development across extended reading programs, as well as context-specific investigations that account for the diverse cultural and institutional settings in which English is taught worldwide.

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