Students' Motivation of, and Engagement in Reading with Stories

Guru Prasad Poudel
Facutly Member, Kathmandu Shiksha Campus
Email: sharmagokul061@gmail.com
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Abstract

A number of factors may affect the practice of teaching and learning English language. Amid them, the motivation of, and engagement in learning can have significant impact on learning achievement in English, however, a qualitative study is required to examine the role of motivation and engagement in reading particular content. In this regard, this study aimed to explore the issues related to a reading intervention with a growing concern about English language learners' reading achievement focusing upon learners' participation in learning activities. Based upon the data from the interviews with instructors and a focus group of students, this study revealed a significant impact of motivation of and engagement on reading activities. High interest, yet challenging reading materials, an interactive and collaborative learning environment, and the quality of instruction and attitudes proved to be critical for students' engagement in reading. Furthermore, the English language learners faced challenges in oral reading and participation in making predictions.

Key Words: Motivation, engagement, reading proficiency, stories, achievement

Introduction

There are increasing numbers of English language learner throughout the world. Similarly, the recent research works made in the field of English as foreign language learning have found that there is a rapid growth in the English language learners' population in recent years. It is reported that approximately 65% of non-native learners of English have been involved in English as second and foreign language learning programs across the world (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008). Reading is one of the basic skills of language which is equally important for developing proficiency in speaking and writing. Learning English also means reading variety of texts in English and developing potential skills for communication in English both in speech and writing. These days English language learning has drawn public attention to

enhance learners' academic engagement and success more than ever. Since reading skills are a critical foundation for academic success, the magnitude of reading education should not be underestimated. A number of studies (Chiappe & Siegel, 2006; Denton, Anthony, Parker, & Hasbrouck, 2004; Gunn, Biglan, Smolkowski, & Ary, 2000; Saunders & Goldenberg, 1999; Slavin & Cheung, 2005) investigated the efficacy of reading intervention programs, and agree that classroom intervention could be an effective way for enhancing motivation and engagement in reading of English. A majority of reading intervention studies (Chiappe & Siegel, 2006; Silverman, 2007; Klingner & Vaughn, 2000; Gunn, Biglan, Smolkowski, & Ary, 2000; Giambo & Mckinney, 2004; Denton, Anthony, Parker, & Hasbrouck, 2004, Neupane, 2016, Dawadi, 2017) compared pre-and post-test results to examine the efficacy of intervention programs. While the subjects grade level, intervention tools (e.g., phonetics, word and sound identification, vocabulary, comprehension, oral reading fluency), the length of intervention, and measures of efficacy are varied, a common thread of these studies is that intervention programs have a positive effect on students' reading to some degree. Furthermore, Slavin and Cheung (2005) speculated that even the reading programs that did not result in a positive impact on student achievement measures might affect student interest level and reading behaviors. The studies that quantified post-intervention test results in order to measure the efficacy of reading intervention, however, often overlooked an affective aspect of the intervention, such as student motivation and engagement. Affect, on the other hand, has been identified as one of the most critical factors in student reading engagement (Connor, Jakobsons, Crowe, & Meadows, 2009; Guthrie & Wigfield, 1999; Guthrie, Wigfield, Barbosa, Perencevich, & Toboada, 2004).

Guthrie and Wigfield (1999) maintained that there is interaction between affective and cognitive processing. They further postulated that the coordination of motivational and cognitive processing increases text comprehension. This claim leads to a question in regards to what motivates readers to read. Asselin (2004) and Schiefele (1999) pointed out the importance of intrinsic motivation in reading. Typical intrinsic motivators in reading are interest, curiosity, challenge, social connections, and self-efficacy. Similarly, a number of studies suggested that reading instruction that engages students in reading (1) links outside literacy activities to reading, (2) uses diverse texts, (3) provides authentic reasons to read, (4) promotes collaborative learning, (5) offers choices and options, and (6) challenges students (Asselin, 2004; Brozo & Flynt, 2008; Gee, 1999). Consequently, students' 'situational interest' which is linked to student intrinsic motivation is likely to increase. Thus, motivation and engagement, though they are different, can feed and influence each other. Pertaining to significance of student interest in reading, Connor et.al (2009) claimed that the effectiveness of reading instruction depends not only on students' language and literacy skills but also on the level of interest. Elley and Mangubhai's (2013) intervention study also found that high interest story books helped the intervention group gain reading and listening comprehension at twice the normal rate.

Another key factor influencing student reading engagement is instructors' perception or expectation. Worthy (2003) highlighted how teachers' enthusiasm about reading could have an affirmative effect on student interest in reading. The quality of instruction is critical for engagement. For instance, Many, Dewberry, Taylor, and Coady (2009) claimed that teachers who had a good understanding of language and literacy development provided more responsive and meaningful reading instruction to students' needs. Some of the scaffolded instruction that was demonstrated included making connections to students' experiences and prior knowledge, making the most of teachable moments, and using multiple resources to support students' reading. Neupane (2016) claimed that appraisal confidence and appraisal calibration affect higher level processes in reading comprehension. She further asserts that good learners are judged in terms of their performance in reading tests and the teachers can provide feedback to learners and ask them to provide justification for their answers. In the same way, the study of Dawadi (2017) explored the relationship between reading strategy used and EFL reading proficiency. The study showed that high proficiency learners were the higher users of cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies than their low-proficiency peers.

Given the findings of previous studies, student motivation increases student engagement in reading activities. Among a variety of factors that motivate students to read, high interest books, engaging instruction, collaborative learning environment, and connection between inside and outside school literacy activities are particularly relevant to this study. Though the effectiveness of interventions for English language learners is far more complex compared to their native language learning counterparts, learners' engaged teaching learning activities bring simplicity and comprehensibility in learning English. This study, therefore, explored issues related to a reading intervention with particular attention to students' participation in reading activities.

The problem for the study has been originated from a reading intervention study conducted with 20 Ninth Grade English language learners of a public school. The students who scored below the 25th percentile in the annual examination of reading test, and/or who were recommended by their teachers, participated in the intervention. This study adopted the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DR-TA) as discussed by Stauffer, 1969. The DR-TA strategy is a Problem-solving discussion strategy designed to support comprehensive reading (DeVries, 2004, p. 164). During reading, students pause at predetermined stops and generate hypotheses in regard to what the story is about or what will happen next. As they continue to read, students' predictions are confirmed, rejected, or modified. Through this cycle, students are encouraged for making predictions and are asked to reason their predictions. Students do most of the talking, and their ideas are valued to facilitate students' thinking and reasoning skills. Another potential benefit of the DR-TA strategy stems from its small-group setting. Group work reduces students' anxiety, and increases their opportunities to speak out more often than in a whole class setting (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008).

This reading intervention program was implemented at Shree Tri-Shahid Secondary School located in Aandhikhola Rural Municipality, ward No.1, Syangja. The total student population was 45 at the time of the study. The large ELL student population in this school reflects an increasing interest in learning in a school where English medium instruction has been adopted. Most of the students' families are of low socio-economic status. Almost 54% of students attending free Tiffin in this school. A curricular feature of the school, a built-in small-group activity time, allowed this reading intervention program to be implemented without interrupting students' regular class time. The small-group instruction was created by the school to serve individual students' needs efficiently. During the small-group activity time, the participating students were pulled out from their classrooms and placed into four small intervention groups. Each group consisted of 5-6 participants. For a month the researcher led small-group sessions three times per week for 30 minutes, for a total of 20 sessions. Two story books and a prescribed book were selected for the DR-TA instruction. The school's English teacher initially provided a list of books that are appropriate to Ninth Grade readers. The researcher for this study selected two books from the list based on the following three criteria: the books that (1) help students build background knowledge in subjects such as English, (2) include illustrations and pictures to support the development of predictions and students' comprehension, and (3) have complete sentences with limited colloquial expressions. Although the study adopted a mixed method, this paper focuses on qualitative data only, especially instructors' and students' perspectives with regard to the reading intervention program.

Methodology

The review of related literature indicates the gaps in the research works based on the processes of reading intervention and perceptions of participants on reading intervention from qualitative perspectives. To bridge such a gap, this study employed a qualitative approach. Qualitative research requires transparency of the research process including some limitations. Qualitative studies must inform readers of any research bias and partial views so readers can take this information into account (Seale, 2004; Shank, 2002). Employing this framework, I adopted the possible fallible nature of knowledge based on incomplete or imperfect evidence. Nevertheless, I hold the value of scientific inquiry and the evidence that supports my interpretation and claims.

The primary data for the study was elicited from the interviews with three instructors and a focus group discussion with the students who participated in the intervention. Interviews were designed to include instructors' points of view, while a focus group of children was adopted to understand students' perspectives. Upon completion of the reading intervention, interviews were conducted with the three instructors who led the small-group DR-TA sessions. Each interview lasted from 30 to 40 minutes. Three English teachers teaching at the selected schools were interviewed.

However, the researcher, himself as an instructor implemented the DR-TA strategy in a small-group setting throughout the study. He also participated in the interviews after completion of the intervention study. Among all participating students, five of them volunteered to participate in the focus group interview at the end of the reading intervention period. Two of those students received specific orientation considering their cognitive ability and the behavior. The students' focus group interview was conducted by the researcher at the school and lasted approximately 30 minutes. The audio-recorded interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through inductive analysis. Shank (2002) explains the inductive analysis as 'reasoning to a probable conclusion' (p. 130). The inductive analysis seeks a conclusion which may reject or confirm what was assumed or known (Shank, 2002). Specific to this study, through the process of coding and categorizing, patterns were identified and themes were built (Shank, 2002). In order to increase validity and reliability of the data, the researcher crosschecked the categories and compared the identified themes (Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results and Discussion

Three major themes were developed from the emerging patterns in the data including motivation, engagement, and progress of comprehension prediction skills. Specifically, while students' motivation was highly related to the content of stories, the process of DR-TA instruction, and the collaborative learning situation, their engagement in reading was subject to oral reading, teacher attitude, and the quality of teacher instruction.

Motivation to Read

Content of stories

The students were motivated by the high-interest yet challenging reading materials. An instructor, Tej Prasad (Pseudo name) stated that when his group was reading *Hare and Tortoise* students could not wait until the next session to learn how the story ended; they went to the school library to check out the book and read it through. Although Tej Prasad realized that it made the following prediction activity impossible, he was thrilled to discover how highly motivated his students were to read the story. The student focus-group interview data also corroborates the students' high interest in the story of *Hare and Tortoise.* The students at the focus group interview particularly pointed out how *Hare and Tortoise* made them upset:

Student A: Pradip (a student who was not in a focus group) said he didn't like *Hare and Tortoise* because it's sad. Student B: It was sad because at the end hare lost the competition. Students' strong emotional reaction to this story suggests

their attachment to the story, though they expressed they did not like how the story concluded. Other students claimed that

Hare and Tortoise was the most popular story among those they read.

Another instructor, Mohanraj, described a similar enthusiasm displayed by his students: When we started *Climbing to a Hill* they [students] could not wait to find out what happened.

They started looking in the back because they just could not wait to find the solution….and then at the end, they were like, and they wanted more! A student at the focus group confirmed this by stating that he did not like to take a break from *Climbing to a Hill*. Similar to Tej Prasad's and

Mohanraj's experiences, Jayanti witnessed a strong motivation among students when they read

Climbing to a Hill and Hare and Tortoise: When the time would be up, and we would be at the end of the chapter or the end of the story, they would be like, Let's just read one more page. The student focus-group interview also echoes these instructors' comments. Some students expressed that reading is fun, more fun than going outside, and, yeah, I don't want to go to recess when

I'm reading *Climbing to a Hill* includes not only problem-solving based stories, but is also a chapter book. Mohanraj mentioned that students were proud of reading the chapter book. He described, *they were excited about a big book. I think that really excited to read Climbing to a Hill* but I think overall they would have liked to see more chapter books.

Thus, findings indicated that what motivated students to read was the story content rather than linguistic simplicity that makes the reading effortless. The two books that were the most popular did not have simple linguistic forms or structures that could lessen reading difficulties.

For example, *Hare and Tortoise* has a number of colloquial expressions that students rarely encounter in their daily lives and *Climbing to a Hill* is lengthy with complicated story plots. An advantage of reading challenging books was that it allowed students to build confidence about reading, enhancing their self-efficacy.

Collaboration and interaction

The findings indicated that collaborative learning not only creates more opportunities to listen and speak, but also provides opportunities for students to

help each other comprehend stories. Jayanti (Instructor) described how her students helped each other. In particular, a student was occasionally pulled out for English for Specific Use, and as a result, she could not always follow the stories. Jayanti assigned her students to take turns in sharing with the student key points of the previously read stories. Then, they would talk about what she remembered and then what they remembered so they actually corroborated each other. Mohanraj also stated that he noticed how the group work benefitted students. He noted: *If they discovered something new like when they would listen to someone else make a prediction and they would be like, _Oh, I didn't realize that!....They can appreciate each other's perspectives and points of view. And, especially the English language learners, they can learn too from, like, to see where they're coming from and how did they make that prediction or what did they read. So, I think having them together is definitely beneficial to both.*

Another benefit of group work was using students' native language. For example, Tej Prasad had an ELL student with very limited English skills, and he described how another student helped the first: *A lot of times she couldn't communicate. She had to get another one of the*

English speaking students and they would translate for her. What she was trying to say because she didn't know how to say it.

Thus, the interactive DR-TA process in small group instructional settings turned out to be greatly instrumental in student progress because students were not only able to learn different perspectives but also able to assist each other in comprehension of stories.

Engagement in Reading

Oral reading skills and participation

Instructors reported that ELLs particularly showed difficulty in oral reading which discouraged students from getting engaged in reading aloud. Jayanti described how ELLs responded to oral reading practice:

My three ESL students, they were very reluctant to read. They didn't want to read, I had to persuade them. They start reading they'd maybe read two sentences and they'd give up. That was frustrating to me because I wanted them to succeed. I didn't want them to feel frustrated. I did not always make them read. I didn't want them to feel like they were forced.

Mohanraj also noticed that ELLs read ahead to make sure they could read. He reasoned this was the case because they were afraid if they started reading and did not know the vocabulary, then they'd be embarrassed. Similarly, Tej Prasad, reported

difficulty in oral reading among ELLs, saying, *Yeah, like, a couple of students, they would, it would be like, very choppy like, word for word. … so it's hard to comprehend what you're reading when you're just trying to figure out what the words are.* Some students at the focus group expressed a concern about oral participation in making predictions. A student stated, *they'd be laughing at each other.* Another student said*, I agree with you.* When the focus group moderator asked why they laughed at each other, a student responded*, because they'd be taking long sometimes.*

Thus, oral reading and oral participation in making predictions inadvertently created a disconcerting learning situation to those students whose oral reading and speaking skills were limited.

Instructor's quality and expectations

The quality of instructors and their attitude toward reading appeared to make an impact on students' engagement in reading. Specifically, teachers who were well-prepared and knowledgeable about the background of stories were able to engage students further beyond the text. As already stated, one of the selection criteria of reading materials was background knowledge that integrates subject matter such as Social Studies. For example, *Hare and Tortoise* involves a story of two animals with a strong message while *Climbing to Hill* can help students understand adventurous journey, Trekkers and Mountain climbing.

When instructors had background knowledge related to these time periods, they were able to expand on the students' predictions. Two instructors, Jayanti and Tej Prasad, showed a striking contrast in their instructional approach, and demonstrated how the quality of instruction and attitude could result in different effects on student reading involvement. Jayanti particularly, expressed her frustration over her students' lack of background knowledge. She expected that students had already learned about the race of two animals. To her surprise, however, she stated that her students did not really understand and that they had numerous questions. In particular, students' interest in competition became palpable while they were reading *Hare and Tortoise*. She described the situation: *It had to do with a fair competition and they knew a little bit but they asked a lot of questions about race and competition. Why did they do that to a person in that book? They had a lot of questions about that book. I don't want to say too much because I don't know, you know. Because they are supposed to comprehend the book as well as fill out what they already learned in school and I didn't want to go too far with what they're not supposed to know yet.*

Jayanti's group consisted of three students who were relatively poor and Jayanti had very little experience. Notable are Jayanti's remarks, I don't know, and not much to say, as she was trying to focus on the story as opposed to discussing competitive issues in a historical context.

In contrast to Jayanti, Tej Prasad approached the background information of *Hare and Tortoise* differently by transforming students' interest into a critical moment of learning. According to Tej Prasad, his group discussed main events in the book: Sometimes, we'd stop at a point where there would be a couple of extra minutes so we'd talk about the history of the book. His following description is noteworthy:

When we read Hare and Tortoise, we talked about individual differences, which is always a topic that is really a little bit hard to discuss. But they really provoked the conversation. So, we talked about it. One boy in the group actually said, 'Well, that's the nature, what that animal did!' So, we talked about it and I thought it was a good discussion about the topic of the book…

In this fashion, Tej Prasad utilized the story to advance students' knowledge and their critical thinking skills. He stated that while she could not observe the same kind of stimulating conversation when they read *Climbing to Hill*, he found some connections to students' lives: *They were interested to see how that visitor did adapt to the environment. One girl was a new student to the school so she could relate to having people pick on her and like that. So, I got a little deeper into that issue than actually talking about the book.*

As these examples have shown, instructors could assist their students in engaging in reading beyond text comprehension by exploring social and historical issues. Therefore, the findings indicate that the teachers' ability to provide responsive instruction to students' needs can make a significant difference in students' engagement in reading. The focus-group interview confirmed this finding. One of the concerns that were raised by the instructors was related to applying the routine of DR-TA instruction. Two instructors expressed that this routine created boredom, and that more variety was needed. Mohanraj stated, *they wanted to do something when they were a little bored. They were like. I think they enjoyed it but every day it was the same thing, so it was a little boring for them.*

However, none of the students at the focus group interview expressed boredom. Rather, they showed how much they enjoyed making predictions, saying things like, *It's fun to guess,* or *Reading is fun*. It is interesting to note that Tej Prasad and Jayanti, who were vastly involved and enjoyed the reading instruction, did not mention boredom. Tej Prasad described how he made DR-TA activities more creative and fun by dancing around when students' predictions were accurate. He further added, *it was a chance for us to be ourselves and read the books and kind of enjoy it rather than be a structured reading group.* Mohanraj pointed out another important quality of teachers and their attitude for reading: *I think the only thing the people who are actually doing it, they'll be better off if they actually enjoy reading. If they actually enjoy the fact that reading can do so much, even if it's not in educational setting, even if it's just for enjoyment purposes, they need to have that love for the written word in order to pass it on.*

Mohanraj further noted that some instructors did not like to read and suspected that their lack of passion for reading might contribute to students' lack of engagement in reading. His view is in agreement with Worthy's (2002) claim that instructors' interest in reading could make a positive impact on students' reading.

Another salient point was related to instructors' expectations for student reading level. Instructors stated that they were surprised when they discovered students performed much better than they had expected. During their instruction, students struggled with oral reading and made less accurate predictions and displayed comprehension difficulties. Surprisingly, however, students showed much better comprehension skills in their discussion as the following excerpts evidenced:

Jayanti: I examined one student's performance, and he is doing a lot better than I thought he was in the comprehension. But he, from what I thought, from just hearing him read, and then over the sessions, he got a lot better than I thought he would.

Tej Prasad: *I think that even his predictions, I'm not sure how he was before, but predictions were, I think, they were really good….no, I thought maybe he did do a little bit better than what I would have thought he would have.*

Mohanraj: *My, one of the students that I thought was going to be the worst reader; he's not the worst reader. But I thought he wasn't going to go up as high in the predictions but he proved me wrong today. I thought that, with him, I was going to get to Level Two and he was able to go to Level Three with Two being an independent.*

These instructors' comments divulged that they had low expectations based on Students' limited oral reading skills, yet, the students' comprehension skills proved to be better. While it is not known how the instructors' low expectations may have influenced their reading instruction and the students' learning process in this study, it is crucial for teachers to hold the same high expectation for all students. The teachers' role, manifested through quality, attitude, and expectations, can play a central role in students' engagement in reading.

Progress in Prediction and Comprehension Skills

Instructors expressed that they noticed students' improvement in prediction skills over time. Specifically, predictions were more relevant to stories as time progressed during the intervention period. More accurate prediction, according to the instructors, signified an increase in student comprehension skills. For example, students seemed to be very confused. Consider below how Tej Prasad and Jayanti described their experience:

Tej Prasad: *In the beginning, their predictions were really broad; they would just go all over the place…. After we went to the end and to the Climbing to Hill book which really requires them to follow the story, they were able to pick up faster and they really, it made them proud every time that they made a good prediction.*

Jayanti: *They definitely got better as we continued. At first, they were really weak and not really substantial and then, as time went on, I felt like predictions were more on target and related more to the story as time progressed.*

Mohanraj expressed a concern about a student who had limited comprehension as well as speaking skills. He described this particular student' struggle: *She would say random things that didn't make any sense and have anything to do with the story*. Similar to Mohanraj's experience, Tej Prasad stated that student's predictions in his group sometimes were not based on the story as he noted: *Their predictions were off, not based on the comprehension of the story. Rather, their predictions were a wild guess but based on their imagination*. He attributed the lack of accuracy in predictions to students' lack of comprehension of the stories.

Thus, the findings indicate that there is a close connection between the ability to make an accurate prediction, and comprehension skills. When students had difficulty in comprehending stories, their predictions were less relevant to the stories.

Conclusion and Implication

The results of the study enabled me to draw the conclusion that learners' engagement in learning enhanced their proficiency in reading and competencies in communication. High-interest and yet challenging reading materials made a positive impact on students' motivation to read more. Similarly, teachers' quality, attitude, and expectations played a crucial role in engaging students to read. In addition, this study challenges a notion of a connection between oral reading fluency and comprehension skills, especially whether or not this application is a fair judgment of students' comprehension skills. However, I came to realize that students' interest and their motivation in reading are not necessarily contingent upon the text difficulty. Rather, their interests are dependent on how compelling and interesting the stories are. This result resonates with the claims of Connor et al. (2009) and Guthrie et al. (2004) in their respective studies. The finding of this study particularly resembles the benefits of high-interest books as Denton et.al. (2004) state: Good story books provide strong intrinsic motivation for children and an emphasis on meaning rather than form. When read often, these books increase exposure to the target language (p. 56).

Thus, reading materials that pique students' interest and motivation are one of the most significant factors for successful reading programs. The findings of this study suggest that an instructor's role is pivotal not only in presenting reading materials but also in facilitating critical reflection on what students have read. While one instructor's approach was restricted to instruction of text comprehension and oral reading, another instructor used stories as a point of advancement through discussions of critical social and historical issues. Specific to instructors' expectations, findings suggest that instructors' low expectations based on students' lack of fluent oral

reading and inability to express themselves orally when making predictions appeared to be groundless. What this result implies is that the connection between oral reading skills and comprehension skills are not necessarily tightly knitted. Denton et al. (2004) suggested a somewhat confirmatory claim regarding this issue. The study could not determine the relationships between the two variables *oral reading fluency and comprehension skills.*

Collaborative and interactive learning not only prompted student interaction but also created a venue for students' shared native language as a resource. Despite some limitations, the findings illuminate and provide valuable insights into reading intervention programs with English language learners. This study suggests a few pedagogical implications as: first, it is important to choose interesting and yet challenging reading materials to motivate students to read; second, teachers should be well-prepared to be able to connect student reading to grade-level curriculum. It is of note that building and activating students' background knowledge is highly dependent on teachers' knowledge and skills to engage students further beyond text comprehension; third, a collaborative and interactive reading program is recommended as students can learn each-others' perspectives while enhancing language learning processes; and finally, it is encouraged for teachers to have realistic yet high expectation for students.

(Mr. Guru Prasad Poudel, M.Phil. in English Language Education, teaches at the Department of English Education, Gorkha Campus, Gorkha and Kathmandu Shiksha Campus, Satungal Kathmandu. He has been contributing in the field of teacher education and professional development since a decade.)

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