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I'll read in English if...: A glimpse into the nature of tertiary ESL reading motivation

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Abstract

Reading is a process that involves effort and choice, hence the significance of motivation. In Malaysian public universities, students usually function in an academic domain where two literacies, English and Bahasa Malaysia, exist side by side, often within the same classroom. This rather unique context adds a new dimension to research on the multifaceted nature of reading motivation. The main objective of this paper is to describe various aspects of motivation for reading in English among undergraduate Malaysian ESL readers, along the constructs of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, and in relation to gender and language proficiency. 319 students responded to an adapted version of the Motivation for Reading Questionnaire (MRQ). Although motivation for reading in English was only at moderate levels, results showed a significantly higher level of extrinsic motivation, compared with intrinsic motivation. There was a preference for English reading for reasons related to tests, compliance and recognition. These findings were consistent across proficiency groups. However, females tended to have a higher level of motivation, especially in reading for test purposes. Findings suggest a performance orientation to reading, with external rewards and a competition to score good marks playing a bigger role than personal or social reasons in reading decisions.

1. Introduction

Reading motivation has been defined as "an individual's goals and beliefs with regards to reading," which consequently influences his or her "activities, interaction and learning with text" (Guthrie & Wigfield, 1999,

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p.199). Children's motivations for reading and their associations with reading development have generated a great deal of interest in Western contexts (Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Guthrie, 2000; Guthrie & Davies, 2003; Wang & Guthrie, 2004; Watkins & Coffey, 2004, among others). These works have consistently shown that intrinsically motivated reading, i.e., for reasons such as knowledge and enjoyment, positively relates to text comprehension and helps to raise children's overall reading achievements. Conversely, reading that is motivated by external factors such as grades and recognition have been found to be counterproductive. While numerous studies have focused on motivation for general L2 acquisition (following the seminal works of Gardner & Lambert (1972), and more recently, Dornyei (1998) and Gardner (2001)), relatively fewer in-depth research has been conducted specifically on motivation for second language reading.

1.1 Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation

Much of the research relating to motivation has been guided by Self Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985), which basically explains how a person's behaviour is driven by either internal or external factors. Central to SDT are the notions of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Ryan and Deci (2000) explain that intrinsic motivation refers to performing an activity for the interest, enjoyment and pleasure associated with the activity itself. It is thus associated with the willingness to experience and explore new ideas, take risks, continuously expand one's potential. Intrinsic motivation may be inhibited, among others things, by social pressures to perform actions that are uninteresting. On the other hand, activities that are performed to achieve an external reward or other instrumental motives are associated with extrinsic motivation. Both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation exist on a continuum, and would affect behavior, including persistence levels, as well as a sense of well-being in relation to the activity concerned. Similar definitions of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation have been applied to reading by Wang and Guthrie (2004).

1.2 First language reading motivation

Reading motivation is known to influence how a person interacts and learns with written texts in the L1. Baker and Wigfield (1999), for example, argue that an individual's decision on choice and amount of effort to expend on a certain activity is based on his or her competence and efficacy beliefs, purposes for achievement, and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) and subsequent studies explored a two-factor model of reading motivation utilizing their Motivation for Reading Questionnaire (MRQ). The instrument comprises two composite scales that measure higher order dimensions of reading motivation, i.e., intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, with composite sub-constructs including curiosity and involvement for the former, and recognition, grades and competition for the latter (see also Baker & Wigfield, 1999**,** Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala & Cox, 1999, Wang and Guthrie, 2004). These studies, mainly involving children, have found that intrinsic motivation especially plays a major role in predicting students' reading amount and breadth. Girls are also generally more positively motivated to read than boys. More recently, McGeown, Norgate and Warhurst (2012) observed significant differences in levels of intrinsic motivation among good and poor readers.

Wang and Guthrie (2004) explain that intrinsic motivation generates curiosity for content and drives cognitive and emotional engagement, leading students to employ more effort to construct meaning and to seek ways to resolve reading difficulties more creatively and strategically. In contrast, extrinsically motivated children are more easily distracted from the text, and would pay attention to limited aspects without deep processing. This lack of complete focus would result in ineffective strategy use, such as the tendency to guess, and to make inaccurate interpretations (Elliot & Dweck, 1988; Wang & Guthrie, 2004).

1.3 Second language reading motivation

While the distinctions between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation have been extensively discussed in L2 literature, L2 reading motivation remains relatively under-researched. Studies thus far have primarily involved Japanese learners of English (Mori, 2002; Nishino, 2005; Takase, 2007). Some associations of motivation with reading outcomes have been identified, such as a higher interest to read in a second language for its extrinsic value (Dhanapala, 2008; Kondo-Brown, 2009), and the recognition of intrinsic motivation as a powerful predictor of engagement, especially in extensive reading (Takase, 2007). Komiyama (2009) affirmed that ESL users studying in an English speaking country would also read for both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons, supporting the self-control continuum proposed by SDT. Although her female subjects showed higher motivation than males, the gender difference was only significant on extrinsic academic compliance, suggesting female students' greater desire to comply with academic expectations. She also found a positive correlation between L2 proficiency and intrinsic motivation. Dhanapala (2008), who studied undergraduates in Japan and Sri Lanka, found the latter to be more motivated to read in English, both extrinsically and intrinsically.

1.4 Aims

Reading experts concede that literacy experiences, values and cultural styles of learning are not necessarily universal (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003), and that differences in social views and practices in fostering reading have been related to different motivational processes (Huntsinger, Jose, Larson, Kreig & Shaligram, 2000). In Malaysian public universities in particular, students function in a complex academic literacy environment of reading in English when another viable language, i.e., the national language, fulfils similar academic functions. Knowledge about reading motivation in such a context is lacking.

This paper discusses intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to read in English among undergraduates in a bilingual academic setting, in relation to gender and language ability groups. The results presented are part of a larger study that hopes to contribute towards understanding "the complexities of learning to read in a language when another literacy...exists" (Bernhardt, 2003, p.116).

2. Method

319 students in a two-level English proficiency course in a Malaysian public university participated in this survey research. They were identified by cluster sampling from a pool of course groups. The students responded to a version of Wigfield and Guthrie's Motivation for Reading Questionnaire (MRQ, 1997), adapted for ESL reading situations by Komiyama (MREQ, 2009). The questionnaire was adjusted to suit the local academic situation, back-translated, piloted and administered in Bahasa Malaysia. Respondents rated statements regarding their reading behaviour on a 4-point Likert type scale ranging from *strongly disagree (1)* to *strongly agree (4)*. Questionnaires were administered in English class by the students' own instructors.

Exploratory factor analysis was carried out to examine the factorial validity of the constructs of the original scales in the local context. This yielded one construct for intrinsic motivation and three sub-constructs for extrinsic motivation, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from .92 to .68. These sub-constructs were labelled Test, Recognition and Compliance. The operational definitions used were as follows, drawn from Wang and Guthrie (2004):

- Intrinsic Motivation (23 items): The reader is driven by "personal interest in the activity itself" (Wang & Guthrie, 2004, p.162). E.g.: When my instructor or friends tell me something interesting, I might read more about it in English.
- Extrinsic Test (ET; 6 items): The reader is motivated by test scores/grades and other externally controlled achievement measures. E.g.: I try to read in English because I need a good score on English tests.

- Extrinsic Recognition (ER: 10 items): The reader is motivated by external recognition and/or validation of L2 reading ability by significant others (teachers and peers). E.g.: I like to get positive comments on my English reading.
- Extrinsic Compliance (EC; 3 items): The reader puts priority on complying with rules or instructions given. E.g.: Finishing English reading assignments on time is very important for me.

The language proficiency measure was the grade achieved in the national standardized English examination (SPM).

3. Results

Table 1 shows the mean levels of English reading motivation among the students according to motivational constructs: Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Test, Extrinsic Recognition and Extrinsic Compliance, as well as overall extrinsic motivation. Respondents were found to have a significantly higher level of overall extrinsic motivation to read in English ($M=3.14$, $SD=.34$), compared with intrinsic motivation ($M=2.42$; $t=40.95$, $p<.05$). According to subscales of extrinsic motivation, the highest mean was for Test motivation ($M=3.18$, $SD=.45$), followed by Compliance ($M=3.13$, $SD=.40$) and Recognition ($M=3.07$, $SD=.46$).

Table 1. Levels of motivation to read in English

Types of motivation	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Intrinsic	319	1.57	3.26	2.42	.33
Extrinsic Test	319	1.83	4.00	3.18	.45
Extrinsic Recognition	319	1.80	4.00	3.13	.40
Extrinsic Comp	319	1.33	4.00	3.07	.46
Extrinsic Overall	319	2.05	4.00	3.14	.34

With regard to specific questionnaire items, the highest mean scores were also observed mainly on Extrinsic Test items. The students tended to agree with the following statements:

- When the topic is interesting, I am willing to read difficult English materials. ($M=3.40$, $SD=0.64$)[IR]
- I try to read in English because I need a good score on my English tests. ($M=3.36$, $SD=0.63$)[ET]
- I practice reading in English because I need to do well in my future classes. ($M=3.35$; $SD=0.62$)[ET]
- I want to read in English to improve my grades. ($M=3.33$, $SD=0.58$)[ET]
- I like my instructor to say that I read well in English. ($M=3.31$, $SD=0.58$)[EC]

The lowest mean ratings were obtained by items related to Intrinsic Motivation; students tended not to agree with the following statements:

- I enjoy reading good, long stories in English. ($M=2.47$; $SD=0.72$) [IR]
- I like talking with my friends about what I read in English. ($M=2.51$, $SD=0.61$) [IR]
- My friends and I like to share what we read in English ($M=2.58$, $SD=0.70$) [IR]
- I like challenging English readings ($M=2.66$, $SD=0.72$) [IR]

- I enjoy telling my friends about the materials I read in English. (*M*=2.67, *SD*=0.65) [IR]

3.1. Gender

Multivariate analysis of variance was conducted to examine whether there were significant differences in reading motivation and reading comprehension by gender and language proficiency. Motivation levels were generally in the mid-range of above 2 points, with intrinsic motivation scores generally lower than extrinsic motivation. No significant gender difference was observed: both male and female students were only slightly to moderately intrinsically motivated (Male= 2.70; Female= 2.76; $F_{(318)}$= 1.08, n.s.). However, extrinsic motivation among females was significantly higher with regards to Recognition (Male=2.97, Female=3.10; $F_{(318)}$= 4.21 ; p<.05), Compliance (Male=2.97, Female=3.17; $F_{(318)}$= 13.78 ; p<.001), as well as Test (Male=3.06, Female =3.21, $F_{(318)}$= 7.07, p.<.001). Figure 1 illustrates the trends described.
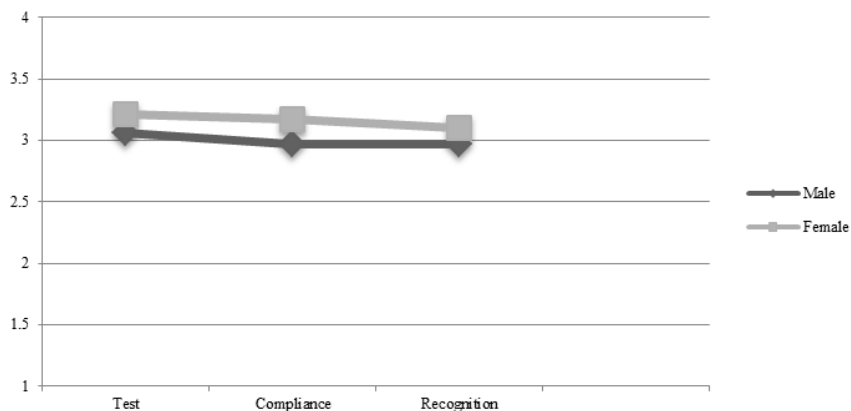

Figure 1. Mean score tendencies for extrinsic motivation by gender

3.2 Language proficiency

Differences in ESL reading motivation by proficiency groups were also explored. The results of the test for differences are summarized in Table 2. Groups were divided into four proficiency levels—elementary, low intermediate, intermediate and upper intermediate, according to their reported SPM English grades. No significant differences were observed in intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to read in English, regardless of proficiency levels. However, students in the higher proficiency groups displayed a slightly lower level of Extrinsic Test motivation, and the opposite was observed for Extrinsic Compliance.

Table 2. Mean score profiles and differences in reading motivation by L2 proficiency levels

Proficiency level		Intrinsic	Extrinsic Test	Extrinsic Compliance	Extrinsic Recognition	Extrinsic Overall
Elementary	Mean	2.38	3.23	3.07	3.04	3.12
	N	81	81	81	81	81
	SD	.31	.41	.37	.44	.30
Low Intermediate	Mean	2.41	3.20	3.14	3.06	3.15
	N	93	93	93	93	93
	SD	.32	.46	.40	.47	.34
Intermediate	Mean	2.41	3.16	3.13	3.12	3.14
	N	87	87	87	87	87
	SD	.34	.44	.44	.41	.35
High Intermediate	Mean	2.46	3.06	3.15	3.03	3.10
	N	44	44	44	44	44
	SD	.31	.52	.39	.56	.37
Total	Mean	2.41	3.18	3.12	3.07	3.13
	N	305	305	305	305	305
	SD	.32	.45	.40	.46	.34
	df	304	304	304	304	304
	F	.669 (n.s.)	.86(n.s.)	1.48(n.s.)	.60(n.s.)	.61(n.s.)

4. Discussion & Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to describe intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to read in English as a second language in a bilingual tertiary academic setting, i.e., where English is widely used in learning, but is not the main medium of instruction. The readers investigated were in an environment where various types of reading material in their literate languages were easily accessible. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to read coexisted in this group at slight to moderate levels, respectively. The finding supports the general two-factor model of motivation in Self Determination Theory. The levels of motivation to read in English can probably be explained by the academic culture that prevails in this setting: although students may be assigned English readings as part of their coursework outside their proficiency classes, the medium of instruction for most undergraduate programs is Bahasa Malaysia. While some of the students' science and technology-based courses might use English as the medium of instruction, in those cases, exam questions would be bilingual, and students can choose to answer in Bahasa Malaysia. Students who find reading English material too challenging can usually turn to alternative sources in Bahasa Malaysia; hence, the lack of urgency for English reading.

A higher level of extrinsic motivation to read in English was observed, unlike past studies (Komiyama, 2009; Mori, 2002; Takase, 2007). This is compatible with a performance orientation in reading English for Academic Purposes, where the exam-based nature of academic reading is likely to reduce learning to a competition to score, rather than to gain knowledge for its own sake. This study also highlights the context dependent nature of reading motivation: in an environment where readers have the privilege of choosing between English or the local language for academic study, external rewards seem to play a bigger deciding role in whether to read (or not) in English.

As a whole, findings suggest that the L2 tertiary academic reading environment outside the native English speaker context naturally supports extrinsically motivated reading. This is consistent with the idea that intrinsic motivation to read for its own sake would decrease with age and education levels (Guthrie, 2000). Additionally, the students' motivation to comply with instructors' expectations, assignment requirements, as well as the

apparent need for recognition or validation of their English reading ability could be explained by the tertiary academic culture, where test scores and compliance with course requirements are of paramount importance in order to graduate. Dhanapala (2006) also found recognition to be a strong motivator for Sri Lankan college level EFL learners. It is questionable whether this type of situation is likely to promote the improvement of L2 reading skills or long term engagement with English reading.

Responses on individual questionnaire items in this study suggest that intrinsic motivation would be relatively low when English reading materials are lengthy or challenging. At the same time, there was a high degree of willingness to read challenging materials in English if personal interest is engaged. Therefore in the development of ESL reading skills in particular, instructors should pay close attention to students' interest and language level in choosing reading materials, and to activities that are able to engage readers beyond reading for tests. Previous research findings have indicated that meaningful and engaging reading activities are those that are socially interactive in nature (Colker, 2007; Guthrie, 2000, Shaik-Abdullah, 2005). Frequent encounters with such activities would be able to increase students' intrinsic motivation to seek L2 literacy opportunities beyond required classroom readings, so that they become more proficient second language users in the long term.

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