

The way to make students to “own” their coursebook by retouching the flexible syllabus

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Abstract

The article studies the level of undergraduate student motivation to read. It was hypothesized that if we create a syllabus that gives students a chance to choose topics from a list that contains more than the necessary amount to fulfill the need of the course, learners will become more involved in decision-making, more satisfied by the process of reading and, correspondingly, more motivated to read the materials chosen by them. The study was held at Ishik University, Iraq, with 46 undergraduate ESP students aged 17-19. It is concluded that the possibility for the students to select topics gives them a feeling of control over the learning process and thus increases their motivation. The article should be interesting for both language (reading) teachers and language teaching researchers.

Keywords: Reading, motivation, satisfaction, attribution, controllability

Introduction

Student motivation is one of the key factors of learning success. There are many theories explaining how motivation works. Among them are attribution theories – descriptions of how individuals’ explanations, justifications, and excuses influence their motivation and behavior. Attribution theories of motivation describe how the individual’s explanations, justifications, and excuses about self or others influence motivation.

Bernard Weiner is one of the main educational psychologists responsible for relating attribution theory to formal education. According to Weiner (1992), most of the attributed causes for successes or failures can be characterized in terms of three dimensions:

1. locus (location of the cause: internal or external to the person, e.g., is the student responsible for success/failure or something/somebody else is?)
2. stability (whether the cause stays the same or can change), and
3. controllability (whether the person can control the cause, e.g., whether you are gifted or not cannot be changed, it is as it is).

We can see that (at least) two of them deal with the student. Rhem (1995) also states that learners have intrinsic motivation that help them learn better if there is some level of choice and control.

Recent L2 reading research has discussed potential association between motivation and L2 reading skills (e.g., Day and Bamford, 1998; Hitosugi and Day, 2004; Grabe, 2004). Yamashita (2004: 12) study suggests that “the performance in extensive reading” measured by the participants’ average numbers of pages read per week was related to “positive feelings towards reading” and “self-perception”.

O’Brien, Millis and Cohen (2008) discuss that there are three fundamental learning principles and as the third one they point out that students should

be aware of where they are headed and they should check their progress according to learning objectives.

Problem, research question & hypothesis

Quality of reading skills is important for academic studies, professional success and personal development. This is true especially for English since much professional, technical and scientific literature is published in English. Besides this, reading has become inevitable by the implementation of the internet and world wide web in any kind of communication. Thus, reading skills are essential for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), especially for learners of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), for whom English is not their majors, but a tool in mastering their profession and continuous education in it. However, despite this specific need for the foreign language reading ability, it is the common experience that most students fail to learn to read adequately in the foreign language. Unfortunately, ESP student motivation in reading large volumes is often quite low, which is a serious obstacle on the way of improvement of reading skills.

The present study was designed to answer the following question regarding selection of reading texts for young adults: Will student involvement in topic choice of the reading matter increase student satisfaction and, correspondingly, motivation?

I hypothesized that if I create a syllabus that gives students a chance to choose topics from a list that contains more than the necessary amount to fulfill the need of the course, learners will become more involved in decision-making, more satisfied by the process of reading and, correspondingly, more motivated to read the materials chosen by them. This kind of

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teaching reading which puts the students into decision making process is student-centered. I expected that as a result of this, students would demonstrate better satisfaction level in their course.

Method of study

The study was conducted in the quantitative format. The purpose of this study was to investigate how satisfied the students feel while dealing with already prepared (fixed) course book and while reading their "own" textbook with topics chosen in a student-centered way. A questionnaire about the satisfaction levels of the students during and after the completion of the research had to measure their satisfaction levels about the reading matter.

Two undergraduate groups majoring in Information Technologies at Ishik University in Arbil, Iraq were chosen as control and experimental ones. During the spring semester of 2012-2013 (19 Weeks, 3 hrs of reading classes per week) the reading materials in the control group were a collection of reading passages based on the syllabus (Advanced English). The textbook was Infotech English for Computer Users (4th ed., 2008, Esteras, S.R. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). In the experimental group the texts were selected from various spheres taking into consideration students' interests (some texts were selected from the textbook *Deep into Meaning* (2nd edition, Kanar, M. N. and Bahar, M., Guvender Publishing). Of course I realized that it was impossible to satisfy the needs of every student in the group, but the eventually selected texts were the "champions" among the offered ones.

Ways of text presentation, types of activities, homework and assessment tasks were the same in both groups in order to receive reliable results.

10 texts were studied in both groups in the classroom and the results were assessed in the tests. To provide that texts in both groups were of the same difficulty level, we assessed them according to <http://www.lexutor.ca/vp/eng/>

We used a questionnaire to find out student satisfaction in both the control and experimental groups, in the middle of and at the end of semester. The questionnaire was in Likert scale format: the students had to assess in a 5-grade system how much in agreement with their ideas were the statements below.

- 1 – I totally disagree
 - 2 – I more disagree than agree
 - 3 – I do not have a clear opinion
 - 4 – I more agree than disagree
 - 5 – I totally agree
- 1) I liked the texts under study. 1-2-3-4-5
 - 2) The texts under study were dedicated to interesting, contemporary and useful topics. 1-2-3-4-5
 - 3) The texts under study were comprehensible 1-2-3-4-5
 - 4) I gained professionally useful knowledge from the texts under study 1-2-3-4-5
 - 5) After studying the offered texts my knowl-

edge of vocabulary and terminology increased 1-2-3-4-5

6) After studying the offered texts I can read texts in my majors better 1-2-3-4-5

7) I believe that my reading skills have improved in the process of study 1-2-3-4-5

Participants

As it has already been mentioned, two undergraduate (freshman) groups majoring in Information Technologies at Ishik University in Arbil, Iraq participated in the experiment. Some of them have taken the prep program in English, others were admitted to the university where the studies are in English, based on proficiency exam, as their reading skills were found satisfactory, however, they had almost no experience in reading professional texts, which was a big problem for their studies in majors. As I found out via interviews, although students realized they badly needed to improve their reading skills, especially concerning their majors, they were not very motivated due to the difficulties of the reading process which is time consuming and intellectually complicated.

Students in both groups belonged to the same age group (17-19), gender and age composition in both groups was analogous, to make the comparison of results feasible.

Table1. Statistics dealing with groups' composition

	Control group	Experimental group
Gender	60% male 40% female	65% male 35% female
Age	18.4 (average)	17.8 (average)

Students participated in the experiment and were split into groups on a volunteer basis (beforehand they were explained what kind of teaching reading would be provided in each group). As we wanted the students to be motivated a particular type of reading selection, students decided which group they wanted to belong to. However, as their reading skills were at the same – upper intermediate – level, the starting level of skills in both groups was practically the same, which made the results of two groups comparable.

There were totally 46 students – 22 of them chose to be in the control group, while 24 – in the experimental.

Findings and Discussion

To analyze the data, SPSS 16.0 program was used. Tables 2-5 show student satisfaction (These tables involve the questions asked and students' assessments out of 5 points about how much they agree with the statement, the average satisfaction point each student gave as well as the group as a whole did).

The standard deviation for each student's views is,

Table 2*Student satisfaction level: Control group: stage 1*

Student / question	1. I liked the texts	2. The texts were dedicated to interesting, contemporary and useful topics.	3. The texts are comprehensible	4. I gained professionally useful knowledge	5. My knowledge of vocabulary and terminology increased	6. I can read texts in my majors better	7. My reading skills have improved	Average point	St. dev.
1	2	3	2	3	3	4	2	2,71	0,70
2	3	3	3	4	4	3	4	3,43	0,49
3	3	4	3	4	4	3	4	3,57	0,49
4	4	5	4	4	4	5	4	4,29	0,45
5	4	5	4	4	4	5	4	4,29	0,45
6	4	3	2	4	4	4	3	3,43	0,73
7	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	2,86	0,35
8	4	3	4	3	4	4	3	3,57	0,49
9	3	4	3	2	3	5	4	3,43	0,90
10	1	2	5	2	3	4	3	2,86	1,25
11	1	3	3	4	3	4	4	3,14	0,99
12	5	4	4	2	4	3	4	3,71	0,88

Student / question	1. I liked the texts	2. The texts were dedicated to interesting, contemporary and useful topics.	3. The texts are comprehensible	4. I gained professionally useful knowledge	5. My knowledge of vocabulary and terminology increased	6. I can read texts in my majors better	7. My reading skills have improved	Average point	St. dev.
13	4	4	4	4	4	3	4	3,86	0,35
14	4	5	5	5	4	4	4	4,43	0,49
15	3	5	2	4	3	3	3	3,29	0,88
16	3	3	5	3	5	5	3	3,86	0,99
17	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	3,86	0,35
18	4	4	4	3	3	4	3	3,57	0,49
19	4	4	5	4	4	5	5	4,43	0,49
20	3	2	3	3	4	3	3	3,00	0,53
21	4	3	5	4	3	5	4	4,00	0,76
22	3	3	5	3	5	4	3	3,71	0,88
Av. point	3,32	3,59	3,68	3,45	3,73	3,95	3,50	3.61	
St. dev.	0,97	0,89	1,06	0,78	0,62	0,77	0,66		

except one case, below 1, which, in a 5-points assessment system is relevant. The same can be said about the standard deviations for each question. Only 4 students' answers are on average 4 and above, which means they are quite satisfied by teaching reading. None of the questions on average received a really high appraisal (the highest is 3.95).

Standard deviations at stage 2 are lower than at stage one, which means that students come to more homogeneous views on the issues. 6 students answered 4 and above, which means they are rather satisfied, three of them were less satisfied on the first

stage. This shows a symbolic improvement of the situation. Average answers to all questions are still below 4.

The highest standard deviation per student is 0.64, which means that students have approximately the same view on all questions. The highest standard deviation per question is 0.64, which means that the group has quite homogeneous attitude towards the questions. Seventeen students express satisfaction with teaching reading (4 points and above). Out of seven questions only one got an average a little below 4, which shows that all questions are answered rather

Table 3

Student satisfaction level: Control group: stage 2

Student/ question	1. I liked the texts	2. The texts were dedicated to interesting, contemporary and useful topics.	3. The texts are comprehensible	4. I gained professionally useful knowledge	5. My knowledge of vocabulary and terminology increased	6. I can read texts in my majors better	7. My reading skills have improved	Average point	St. dev.
1	3	3	3	3	3	4	3	3,14	0,35
2	3	3	4	3	4	4	4	3,57	0,49
3	4	4	3	4	4	3	4	3,71	0,45
4	3	3	4	3	4	4	4	3,57	0,49
5	4	5	4	4	4	5	4	4,29	0,45
6	4	3	3	4	4	4	4	3,71	0,45
7	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3,00	0,00
8	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4,00	0,00
9	4	4	4	3	3	3	4	3,57	0,49
10	3	3	3	3	4	3	3	3,14	0,35
11	2	2	3	3	3	4	3	2,86	0,64

Student/ question	1. I liked the texts	2. The texts were dedicated to interesting, contemporary and useful topics.	3. The texts are comprehensible	4. I gained professionally useful knowledge	5. My knowledge of vocabulary and terminology increased	6. I can read texts in my majors better	7. My reading skills have improved	Average point	St. dev.
12	2	3	4	3	4	3	4	3,29	0,70
13	4	4	5	4	4	5	4	4,29	0,45
14	4	5	5	5	5	4	4	4,57	0,49
15	4	4	4	3	4	3	3	3,57	0,49
16	3	3	4	3	4	4	4	3,57	0,49
17	3	3	3	3	4	4	3	3,29	0,45
18	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4,00	0,00
19	4	5	5	4	4	4	5	4,43	0,49
20	4	2	4	3	3	3	3	3,14	0,64
21	3	3	5	3	4	4	5	3,86	0,83
22	4	3	4	3	5	4	3	3,71	0,70
Av. point	3,45	3,45	3,86	3,41	3,86	3,77	3,73	3.65	
St. dev.	0,66	0,84	0,69	0,58	0,55	0,60	0,62		

positively.

We can see that the highest standard deviation per student is 0.58, which means that students have approximately the same view on all questions (the standard deviation decreased a little). The highest standard deviation per question is 0.79, which means that the group has quite homogeneous attitude towards the questions (however, it a little increased compared to stage 1). Almost all (22) students express satisfac-

tion with teaching reading (4 points and above, some of them even answer "5" for all questions). All questions only one got an average above 4, which shows that all questions are answered rather positively. The situation has improved both on per student and per question basis.

Thus, we see a mediocre attitude towards the ways reading is taught, and practically no improvement of attitude in the control group (3.61 → 3.65), and

Table 4*Student satisfaction level: Experimental group: stage 1*

Student/ question	1. I liked the texts	2. The texts were dedicated to interesting, contemporary and useful topics.	3. The texts are comprehensible	4. I gained professionally useful knowledge	5. My knowledge of vocabulary and terminology increased	6. I can read texts in my majors better	7. My reading skills have improved	Average point	St. dev.
1	4	4	5	5	4	4	4	4,29	0,45
2	4	5	4	4	5	4	4	4,29	0,45
3	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	3,86	0,35
4	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	3,86	0,35
5	5	4	4	3	4	4	4	4,00	0,53
6	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3,00	0,00
7	5	4	4	4	4	5	4	4,29	0,45
8	5	5	5	4	4	5	5	4,71	0,45
9	4	4	5	4	3	5	4	4,14	0,64
10	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	3,86	0,35
11	4	4	4	4	5	4	5	4,29	0,45
12	3	3	3	3	4	4	3	3,29	0,45
13	4	5	5	4	4	5	4	4,43	0,49
14	4	5	4	5	5	5	4	4,57	0,49
15	5	4	4	4	5	4	4	4,29	0,45
16	4	5	4	4	4	4	4	4,14	0,35

Student/ question	1. I liked the texts	2. The texts were dedicated to interesting, contemporary and useful topics.	3. The texts are comprehensible	4. I gained professionally useful knowledge	5. My knowledge of vocabulary and terminology increased	6. I can read texts in my majors better	7. My reading skills have improved	Average point	St. dev.
17	4	4	3	3	3	4	4	3,57	0,49
18	5	5	4	4	4	4	4	4,29	0,45
19	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4,00	0,00
20	4	4	4	4	3	4	3	3,71	0,45
21	5	5	5	4	4	5	4	4,57	0,49
22	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	4,86	0,35
23	5	5	4	5	5	5	4	4,71	0,45
24	5	4	4	4	5	5	5	4,57	0,49
Av. point	4,21	4,29	4,08	3,96	4,13	4,33	4,04	4.15	
St. dev.	0,64	0,61	0,64	0,61	0,67	0,55	0,54		

a very positive and improving in the process attitude towards the ways reading is taught in the experimental group (4.15 → 4.43), which was predictable and which confirms our hypothesis. Graphically the results are presented in Fig. 1 below.

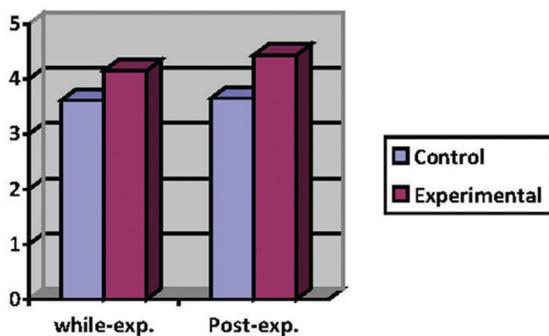


Figure 1.

Limitations of the study

The study was held with 46 students for one semester in one country and one university. Of course, it is not enough to make some overall conclusions. On the other hand, the results quite clearly indicate the tendency which supports our hypothesis.

Conclusions

Thus, our research has shown us that in the chosen sample student satisfaction (and, correspondingly, motivation) level has significantly increased in the experimental group compared to a minor increase in the control group. The higher satisfaction level in the experimental group supports our hypothesis – that student-centered selection of topics for reading mate-

Table 5*Student satisfaction level: Experimental group: stage 2*

Student/ question	1. I liked the texts	2. The texts were dedicated to interesting, contemporary and useful topics.	3. The texts are comprehensible	4. I gained professionally useful knowledge	5. My knowledge of vocabulary and terminology increased	6. I can read texts in my majors better	7. My reading skills have improved	Average point	St. dev.
1	5	5	5	5	4	4	5	4,71	0,49
2	5	5	5	4	5	4	4	4,57	0,53
3	3	4	3	4	4	4	4	3,71	0,49
4	3	4	4	4	5	4	4	4,00	0,58
5	5	5	4	4	4	4	4	4,29	0,49
6	4	4	3	4	4	3	3	3,57	0,53
7	5	4	4	4	5	5	5	4,57	0,53
8	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	4,86	0,38
9	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5,00	0,00
10	4	5	4	3	4	4	4	4,00	0,58
11	4	5	4	5	5	4	5	4,57	0,53
12	5	4	3	4	4	4	4	4,00	0,58
13	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	4,86	0,38
14	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5,00	0,00
15	4	5	4	4	5	4	4	4,29	0,49
16	4	5	5	4	5	4	5	4,57	0,53

Student/ question	1. I liked the texts	2. The texts were dedicated to interesting, contemporary and useful topics.	3. The texts are comprehensible	4. I gained professionally useful knowledge	5. My knowledge of vocabulary and terminology increased	6. I can read texts in my majors better	7. My reading skills have improved	Average point	St. dev.
17	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	4,14	0,38
18	5	5	4	4	4	4	4	4,29	0,49
19	4	4	5	4	5	4	4	4,29	0,49
20	5	4	4	3	4	4	4	4,00	0,58
21	3	4	5	4	4	4	4	4,00	0,58
22	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5,00	0,00
23	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5,00	0,00
24	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5,00	0,00
Av. point	4,50	4,63	4,38	4,21	4,58	4,29	4,42	4.43	
St. dev.	0,72	0,49	0,71	0,59	0,50	0,55	0,58		

rials enhances student satisfaction and motivation as this approach gives them a feeling of control over the learning process. Though the research has a limited scale and to make far-reaching conclusions further research is necessary, we may conclude that in general, the possibility for the students to make their choice in reading matter should enhance both student satisfaction and motivation and eventually improve learning.

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