

How do you Motivate Students to Read? – Teach them at their Instructional Level

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March, 2008

How do you motivate students to read? This is a remarkably important question with seemingly complex answers, but the solution to this issue is complicated more by the number of potential answers than the complexity of any one solution. Cognitive psychologists and reading researchers have frequently studied motivation and suggested many potential interventions. However, a more simplistic yet effective approach might be to assure a match between task demand and student skill.

Vygotsky (1978) discussed the importance of matching task demand and student skill by proposing the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD involves tasks that can be accomplished with some help and represents an optimal level of challenge. For reading, this is best conceptualized through Bett's (1946) concepts of instructional, frustration, and independent levels. Although those three terms are frequently and inconsistently used in practice, Gickling and Armstrong (1978) empirically defined and tested them using 93% to 97% known words as the definition of an instructional level. Passages that contain more than 97% known words represent an independent level and those with fewer than 93% known are a frustration level.

Students consistently demonstrated higher on-task behavior, task completion and task comprehension when reading from instructional level passages (containing 93% to 97% known words) than when reading from frustration material (< 93% known words) or from independent level (> 97%) passages (Gickling & Armstrong, 1978; Shapiro, 1992; Shapiro & Ager, 1992; Treptow, Burns, & McComas, 2007). Moreover, a recent comparison between instructional level material and student interest in the content found that students were more engaged when reading

instructional level passages than frustration level passages, but the interest level did not affect time on task during reading (Burns & Parker, 2008).

Perhaps the most efficient way to better engage students in reading is to allow them to self select material that represents an instructional level. Have the student read from the material for three 1-minute samples and compute the percentage of words that he or she can read correctly within 2 seconds each. If that percentage is less than 93%, then select easier material to use. Recent research has suggested that an instructional level can also be created by preteaching unknown words (Burns, 2007). There is clearly more to motivating students to read than selecting appropriately challenging material, but this is a good first step and may be an effective and efficient intervention for most.

References for Further Study:

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