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How Can We
Motivate
Struggling Latino
Adolescents to Read?

By Melissa Herzig

Motivation: A Missing Key

When I worked as a teacher of deaf students, it was hard enough getting teens to read even when they were good readers. My school was a magnet high school just five minutes from the border of Mexico, where 95 percent of the students were Latinos. The deaf students' experiences with languages may involve using American Sign Language (ASL), a sign language they may have learned in their home country, English, and Spanish. I wanted to learn more about the struggling Latino adolescent students' attitudes towards reading, especially those with varied language background experiences, and if their attitudes towards the target language, English, may have been part of the reason they reported that they did not like reading.

I could see their frustration. Whenever my students were prompted to read, they avoided it. They complained that they were tired or that they wanted to catch up with friends. They depended heavily on me or another teacher to explain what the book said.

Research has shown that motivation plays an important role in literacy development, and motivation leads to differences in achievement within Latino families regardless of socioeconomic status or parents' educational background (Baker, Afflerbach, & Reinking, 1996; Guthrie & Wigfield, 1997).

Surely their frustration with English print was a barrier to motivation, and motivation was critical to reading—and reading was critical; it was the key to the rest of their education. I expected my students to read and I had to hold them to that expectation, but how could I motivate them? How could I induce my students to want to read? I was anxious to find a way. I began by exploring motivation itself. It was so important. Without motivation, the students had much less chance of developing literacy.

Photos courtesy of Melissa Herzig

The Definition of Motivation

THE MOVING TARGET OF MOTIVATION

Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) define motivation as "the cluster of personal goals, values, and beliefs with regard to topics, processes, and outcomes of reading that an individual possesses" (p. 404). This is not the same as having an interest, for one can have an interest in reading but choose not to read. Factors such as background experiences, emotions, and purpose are important. Put succinctly, motivation is what makes a person want to read.

KEY ELEMENTS

Biancarosa and Snow (2004) focused on motivation and self-directed learning as key elements in successful reading programs designed to improve adolescents' reading. They noted that an effective reading program would include the following elements:

- Direct, explicit comprehension instruction
- Effective instructional principles embedded in context
- Diverse texts
- Intensive writing
- Assessment (formative and summative) of students and programs
- Extended time for literacy

Talking with Students

Believing that information about motivation lay in the beliefs, experience, and backgrounds of my students, I interviewed four of them—three females (one ninth and two tenth graders) and one male (a twelfth grader). All four students had learned ASL during their elementary years. With the exception of one mother, none of their families knew English or sign language; all of the families used Spanish at home.

I asked my students three sets of questions. The first set was about their background and experiences with the languages they use. The second set was a survey of questions with multiple-choice answers using the Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile (AMRP) as modified for adolescents by Pitcher et al. (2007). Rather than a closed-ended survey, I changed the format of this questionnaire to conduct semi-structured interviews by asking each student for further explanation of his or her answers; I wanted to learn more about the students' self-concepts, their attitudes about themselves as readers, and about reading. The third and final set involved open-ended interview questions in the AMRP. These questions focus on narrative reading, informational reading, and general reading, and are designed to provide insights into students' reading experiences, attitudes, and motivations. I added several questions about issues involving deaf people, such as questions focused on closed captions, television, and texting.

The AMRP is usually administered as a paper-and-pencil survey, but I signed each question with each of the four possible answers and asked students to make a choice. The interviews were videotaped and checked for clarification.

The Findings

ATTITUDES TOWARD THEIR LANGUAGES

Given the frustrations of so many deaf students with understanding how to use printed language, and knowing that Anglo deaf signers tend to include negative school experiences with languages as a part of their life story as bilinguals (Tompkins, 2000), I had expected my students to report that they devalued English. I was amazed, therefore, when my Latino deaf students reported that they value English quite highly—along with Spanish and ASL. Attitudes toward language can influence students' sense of self, their feelings about their community, and their willingness to use the language (Meltzer & Hamann, 2004; Cook-Gumperz, 1981; Schumann, 1978). Therefore, the students' positive attitudes are noteworthy as they may positively affect their willingness to read.

In fact, my findings suggested that these students were not resistant toward reading at all. Reflecting the attitudes found in children of immigrants (Valdes, 1996), all of my students acknowledged that reading and writing in English is a challenge for them and that they get frustrated at times, but none showed disdain either for the language or for reading it.

READING: IT'S A SOCIAL ACTIVITY

My findings showed that my students' motivation to read seemed to be highly social. Their motivation grew from social purposes and varied depending on with whom they were reading, what they were reading, and their reason for reading. Opportunities to share texts with family and friends played a big role. The students also reported participation in many out-of-school reading activities. Further, they reported enjoying these reading activities. When reading meant watching TV shows with closed captions, reading gossip magazines about stars and sharing them with friends, texting with friends, and using the Internet, the students relished it.

However, the students did not classify these activities—for which they held natural interest and enthusiasm—as reading. Reading for my students was defined exclusively as an activity that occurred in the classroom, and their motivation flagged when they arrived at school, where the activity that they classified as reading occurred. Therefore, they did not classify themselves as readers because "readers" are people who read well at school, and "reading" is a school-based activity. In addition, being a good school reader is not desirable socially for these students. Two of my students reported that they viewed the students who are good school readers as "boring" and "nerdy." My students rarely discussed the required school readings outside of school. They said reading, meaning the reading they did at school, was not interesting and not relevant to their lives.

What Teachers Can Do
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CHANGING THE DEFINITION AND ATTITUDES

By Melissa Herzig

The findings imply that to change the students' attitude toward reading and toward themselves as readers, the students need to broaden their definition of reading. They need to know that being a "good reader" doesn't mean being good at an activity that is restricted to the classroom.

This is where the teacher becomes important. We need to recognize the various literacy engagements that the students participate in outside of the classroom. This recognition prompts us, as teachers, to broaden our scope, our strategies, and the texts we assign. In doing this, we can help maintain the students' motivation and enable them to fulfill our high expectations.

Here are some suggestions:

- **Do a reading inventory**. Help students be more aware of the reading they do outside of the classroom. Note how they read for multiple purposes. This helps students view themselves as readers.

- **Expand the scope of acceptable reading material in the classroom**. Include materials from popular culture, lyrics from popular songs, the Internet, and magazines.

- **Promote the social aspects of reading**. Encourage students to read in environments in which they can share information with friends. For example, select the hot-selling books for teens and discuss these books in a literature circle or book club. Allow students to work in well-monitored pairs or small groups.

- **Keep an eye out for upcoming movies based on books**. Assign the book on which the upcoming movie is based and give students incentives to complete the book before the movie is in theaters. The students can then compare and contrast the book and the movie as a classroom activity.

- **Identify and discuss vocabulary before assigning reading**. In my study, students said that vocabulary discussion that occurred before reading text was helpful.

- **Use narratives or short stories as teaching strategies**. Narratives capture the students' attention, enable them to grasp the nuances of vocabulary, and help them anticipate and predict what the text will say.

ASL and English
INSTRUCTIONAL METHOD INFLUENCES MOTIVATION

During the interviews, the students shared what helped them be motivated about reading in class, and their answers showed that they enjoyed reading more at school when they received support from teachers. Also, they enjoyed the narrative or visual aspects of what they read. This finding is important as it shows that although they are struggling readers, they still show possibilities of being motivated to read.

One said motivation was stimulated when the teachers guided students with their reading assignment by reading aloud in ASL at the beginning of the lesson before letting them read the rest.

By reading aloud, the teachers did not sign word for word but read the text in English and signed it in ASL. When this occurs, the concept in print remains the same, but ASL grammatical structure replaces English grammatical structure. The students, regardless of their age, enjoyed a good read-aloud, and reading aloud in this manner should not necessarily stop after elementary school.

The reasons for the students' frustrations included use of the English vocabulary that they did not understand and lack of narrative connection. These factors can adversely affect motivation for struggling readers. Presenting background information and vocabulary review to build on their prior knowledge seems to be essential. The students are comfortable with narratives because they use less technical language. However, with the support of vocabulary review and background information, the students can be encouraged to read expository academic text. ASL provided access to content for many students. Pairing ASL with reading instruction and using it to ensure access to content material enhances the opportunities for students to learn and understand the material; for students who are not fluent in reading, it is critical.

These findings and the deaf Latino students in this study gave me and other teachers a key to success in supporting their acquisition of better reading skills. The key is what enables them to perform to the best of their ability and to live up to our high expectations. It is our responsibility to accept and use this key.

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