**Can Technology Increase Reading Motivation?**

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**Introduction**

I work in a rural county in North Carolina. I teach students with a hearing loss in grades pre-k through high school. All of my students struggle with language due to their hearing loss. They don’t hear everything as hearing people do, which impacts their ability to read. All of my current students are reading below grade level. They struggle with keeping up in class and few have any desire to read for fun during their spare time. I want to motivate my students to read and to become better readers. Reading more increases their ability to read and it increases their vocabulary (Krashen, 1993). This is my main reason behind wanting to motivate my students to read. I want them to want to read for themselves- for fun and for learning. While there are many approaches to getting them to read more, I want to include a technology component. In the past, I have found students are much more interested in a task if there is technology involved, as students today are looking for entertainment when they are learning (Hill, 2010). Technology needs to be integrated thoughtfully and consistently to have an impact on literacy (Blachowicz, Bates, Berne, Bridgman, & Perney, 2009).

I initiated my study with the following research question: “Can integrating technology into my instruction motivate my students to read?” My question was broad, but I wanted it to apply to all of my students. Later on in my research, I was able to narrow down which technologies I would use. I realized that if I want my students to be successful in life and become global citizens, they needed to be able to read news articles, different types of communication, etc. They needed to see themselves as readers and have the confidence to know that they can read articles and understand what the articles are saying. So beyond my idea for them to be readers for learning and for fun, I want them to be good, confident readers and to be productive members of society.

**Methods**

I began my study with a sample of six of my students who have the ability to read and do not require much academic support. I distributed a survey to both the students and their parents. I gave the survey to my students to see how they viewed themselves as readers and to get their perspective on reading in general. My middle school student and my elementary student took the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey because his language and reading levels are low, while the rest of my students took a reading survey adapted from Atwell’s *In The Middle* (Atwell, 1998)*.* The parent survey included questions about their child’s reading habits, as well as the parent’s. I wanted to see how the parents viewed reading since that might have an impact on how their child views reading. I also wanted to see how the parents thought of their child as a reader.

After giving the survey, I did have some surprising results. Two of my students that are close to grade level enjoy reading at home. The parent survey confirmed that and mentioned that the students often read for fun at home. The parents also indicated that they support their child’s reading habits by providing books or the opportunity to obtain library books regularly. Unfortunately, the other results of the student surveys were not surprising. The four remaining students disliked reading; two of them even responded on more than one occasion that “reading is boring.” This is consistent with Goetze & Walker’s 2004 study, who determined that students that are behind in reading are less likely to be engaged in literacy activities.

The parent surveys of these students were a mix. One parent did not seem to care that her students was not reading much and did not seem eager to fix that. She said that she was not interested in finding out any available resources to help her student read. One parent survey came back with a note about how excited they were that I was trying to motivate their child to read. The parent was begging for ideas since nothing they had done at home was working.

I decided to concentrate on the three students who had the lowest motivation according to the surveys: one elementary student, one middle school student, and one high school student. I saw the elementary student twice a week, the middle school student three times a week, and the high school student once a week. The elementary student is currently reading one grade level below his peers, but has been falling behind since last year. He says he doesn’t like to read at all and only reads to complete assignments, so I knew after interviewing him I wanted him to be a part of my research. His parents also sent back the survey begging for ideas to get him to read. They felt like they had tried everything, and nothing was working. The 8th grader is six grade levels below his peers in reading and has no parent support at home, as he uses sign language to communicate and no one else in his family does. I am concentrating on him so we can get his reading level up as he enters high school. He is extremely smart and catches on quickly, especially when a computer is involved. Finally, the high school student has said she repeatedly will start a book, but won’t finish it. She is about three reading levels behind her peers, but does not show much enthusiasm for trying to become a better reader.

Anderson & Balajthy (2009) and Hill (2010) suggest that a variety of technology options need to be available since each student is unique and will not respond to all technologies. Hill (2010) suggests that a teacher really needs to know each student before being able to combine technology and books successfully. Connecting a required activity with something students enjoy doing can positively impact the outcome of the required activity (Ragen, 2012). So after considering each student, his/her interests, and his/her needs, and the results of the survey, I decided on the technologies I would use for each student. I wanted something that was easily accessible and easy to use, and would not take a long time explaining how to use it. I landed on different technologies for each student.

The elementary student indicated that he liked to read books on the computer, so we used *Tumble Books* and *Big Universe*. These websites have books online to read. There is narration, but it can also be muted to have the student read. *Big Universe* also has a section where students can publish their own works and have others read them. I thought this feature would really motivate the student to read. He also likes that many times the books we read together are a part of Accelerated Reader, so he can earn points in his regular classroom. I think this also increases his motivation, but the AR component is not a part of my research since that is something his regular teacher is doing. The middle school student used Power Point as his main technology, but we are also using *Tumble Books* and *Big Universe*. He is creative and loves art, so I thought using Power Point would let him be creative with having to spend much time introducing a new technology. He enjoys flipping through stories he was written on Power Point and rereading them. He is excited that others can read his stories and enjoys reading stories other students have written on *Big Universe*. And finally, my high school student is beginning to think about life after high school. She wants to become a veterinarian. However, she doesn’t have much knowledge about what a veterinarian actually does other than a vet works with animals. Together, we found blogs on the internet that told us a variety of stories about being a vet: some are funny, some are serious, and some just tell what kind of day someone had. She has Internet access at home, so this is something she can easily do in her free time, if she wanted to do so. By finding texts that interested her, I thought it could motivate her to read more frequently.

**Findings**

Throughout the course of my research, I used observations and interviews with my students to collect data. This was a great way to see how they interacted with texts and see how they felt about assignments as we go. The elementary student in particular loved to talk about himself, so it was easy to get answers from him. The middle school student does not have much language, so it was hard for him to communicate, but he did talk with me about his likes and dislikes of reading. And the high school student was reluctant to talk about her feelings about reading, but did seem to be more open to it as we continued the process.

When I presented the idea of reading other students’ stories to the elementary student, he became excited. I knew I would be able to use this as a motivator for him. *Big Universe* has a section where this feature is available, and each session, the student would beg for me to read a story from ‘another kid.’ He also enjoyed reading *Tumble Books*. He said he liked reading from a computer better than from a ‘real book.’ Szalavitz (2012) suggests that comprehension tends to go down when using an e-book, but this was not the case for my student. He routinely scored 100% on the quizzes from *Tumble Books*. One day when my computer would not connect to the internet and we had to use a paper book, he was disappointed. When asked about how he felt about reading in the classroom, he said that the stories the teacher picked to read were “boring” and because I let him pick which books to read, it was more fun. He also said in class many times they take turns reading and it hard for him to follow along because he can’t always hear what they are saying. He prefers to “read in [his] head.” Since I allowed him to choose which books he read and let him read in his head, like he preferred, I think that allowed him to be more engaged with the reading, resulting in high quiz scores. While the approach seems to make a difference with him, using a technology for him was clearly a motivator to read.

The middle school student was excited when he could use his creative side using Power Point. And he enjoyed reading the stories we had written together, but for some reason, I couldn’t get that to translate to reading books, either in print or online. He posted his stories on the class blog and was excited when people left comments for them. When he read other stories from *Big Universe*, he either thought they were boring or it was a bad story. When I asked him if there was anything I could do to motivate him to read, he said no. The results to his follow up survey showed no change in his motivation to read. I think that knowing he is below grade level in reading (scores a 1 on the EOG every year); he thinks he is a poor reader, so that affects how he views reading. He is also past the prime age for language acquisition, so gaining new vocabulary and reading skills requires much repetition and direct, explicit instruction. He was quick to say when he felt like he was reading a “baby book.” I think seeing his friends read chapter books makes him feel discouraged about not having the reading skills to read a real chapter book himself.

My high school student did not seem excited about the idea of reading, even if the topic was interesting for her. We worked together to find several blogs she could read in her free time at home. Much to my surprise, the next session she brought a list of other blogs she found. When I asked her what led her to look for me, she said that the ones we found were more serious and day-to-day type blogs, but she wanted to read some funny stories. With that in mind, we found a few more posts that were funny for her to read in her spare time. She kept a list of the posts she read and brought it to me each week. I knew she must be excited about it because she was bringing me a list each week. She rarely remembers to bring anything to our sessions, so I was intrigued that simply reading blogs had caught her attention. When I asked her why blogs were more appealing than a book, she said that with blogs, “get to interact with people online, with a book there is usually only you to talk to unless it is a book the class is reading.” Blogs many times are shorter than a chapter in a book, so if you have limited time to read it is a good option. She mentioned that blogs were much less of a time commitment than reading a chapter book. The National Endowment for the Arts reports that only half of Americans between ages 18 and 24 read for fun (Ferguson, 2011). It seems that my high school student has switched sides.

My students were at the center of my study, so they were actively involved. I routinely asked what they are reading and why and how they feel about it. Every time I asked, the answers were the same- whatever we were reading together. I had to prompt all three of them to talk about what they were reading in class. I asked them if there is anything that I can do to make reading more fun for them or what will motivate them to read more. The elementary student said that I made reading fun because I use the computer so we can read. The middle school student repeatedly said that ‘reading is boring’ no matter what the context of the text. I even asked if there is anything I do that made them unmotivated to read. None of my students have answered that one, but I hope as I continue to grow that they will be able to point out anything that turns them off of reading.

Since I am unable to see my students every day, student progress was slow. When comparing the survey given to the students before the research and the survey after the research, not much changed for the middle school student and the high school student. However, the elementary student did make gains in his view of recreational reading, especially when using technology. He mentioned that reading on the computer is like a game, which is why I think he enjoyed it so much. The middle school student’s survey answers were unchanged. The high school student’s answers did indicate that she now considers reading on the internet to be beneficial. On the initial survey given to her, she thought only reading a book counted as reading. On the follow up survey, she realized that reading comes in various forms: “magazines, stuff on the internet, books, texts [message]?.”

**Discussion**

When the elementary student saw other students’ writings on the internet, that thousands of people could read, he wanted to write a story that could be posted. When I began the research, I did not think about how the motivation to read can spark the motivation to write. In this case it did, and the student is not only working on a story to post on Big Universe, but also enjoys writing more on the class blog. This also held true for my middle school student. He enjoyed reading his own stories so much that he would ask if we could write more. I believe this is because he has control of the vocabulary he uses in his writing, but cannot control what words are used in a text he is reading. He got frustrated when he came across words he didn’t know, even if I had previewed them beforehand. In the future, I need to do a better job of making sure he understands unfamiliar words before he encounters them in a text. While he preferred writing to reading during this process, he didn’t realize that the repeated readings of his own stories were helping his reading and vocabulary. Writing stories and sharing them with others also motivated him to write. It seems like the motivation to read and the motivation to write are closely linked.

I need to do a better job helping students understand what counts as reading and why we do it. My high school student did not realize that reading on the internet for fun is reading! If students think they are only limited to books, then today’s students may never think they read. I think if I empower my students to know when they are reading and why, they will see themselves as better readers. This, I hope, would make them more motivated to read. It is something I will consider in the future because I think it is important how a student sees himself/herself as a reader.

I am not sure why my middle school student did not respond as well to reading with technology. Perhaps it goes back to how he sees himself as a reader. He knows he is several grade levels below his peers, so that could be why “reading is boring.” Maybe I picked the wrong technology and there is something that will be better suited to motivate him to read. Maybe I need to work on his self confidence as a reader. There are many angles to view this, so I will have to explore them all in the future if I want to motivate him to read. Even though I don’t think I changed his reading motivation level, he was more interested in writing. While I didn’t answer my specific question with this student, I do consider it a success because I did see an increase in his interest to write.

Technology will not work for each student, as I discovered during my research. Maybe it was the wrong technology or the wrong approach, but each student is unique. After getting to know our students, we can tailor our instruction to their needs to better guide their education. When looking across all three student responses, they all three found that reading in the classroom was ‘boring’. Giving students the power to choose the texts they read may change their view on reading. Or maybe it was because there was little to no technology used or maybe it was just because the subject matter doesn’t appeal to the student. Today’s students are engaged with technology and for many students, technology can increase motivation to read (Hill, 2010 & Ragen, 2012)

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# **Parents’ attitude to reading survey**

1) Does your child enjoy reading?

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| A lot | Occasionally | Not much |

Any other comments:

2) Does your child read at home?

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| A lot | Quite often | Not often |

3) Where does your child tend to read at home?

Please comment:

4) When does your child read at home?

Please comment:

5) Does your child read on their own or to someone else at home?

Please comment:

6) What does your child prefer to read at home?

(E.g. books, magazines, comics, fiction, non-fiction, short stories, poems, genre…)

Please comment:

7) Does your child bring a reading books home from school regularly?

Please comment:

8) What type of books does your child bring home from school to read?

Please comment:

9) Does your child read their school reading book:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Because they want to |  |
| Because they are expected to |  |
| Because you ask them to |  |

10) Do you know what reading books are available to your child in school? Would you like a list of resources?

Please comment:

11) Is there anything you feel the school could do to help make reading even more interesting/enjoyable for children?

Please comment:

Reading Survey

Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. If you had to guess…

How many books would you say you own? \_\_\_

How many books would you say are in your house? \_\_\_

How many books would you say you have read in the last twelve months? \_\_\_

2. How did you learn to read?

3. Why do people read? List as many reasons as you can think of.

4. What does someone have to do in order to be a good reader?

5. What kind of books do you like to read?

6. How do you decide which books you will read?

7. Who are your favorite authors?

8. Have you ever reread a book? \_\_\_

If so, can you list the titles?

9. How often do you read at home?

10. In general, how do you feel about reading?

(Taken and adapted slightly from Nancie Atwell’s book In The Middle, 2d ed. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc, 1998.)

**Elementary Reading Attitude Survey**

1 is Great! 5 is Bad!

How do you feel when you read a book on a rainy Saturday?

1 2 3 4 5

How do you feel when you read a book during free time at school?

1 2 3 4 5

How do you feel about reading for fun at home?

1 2 3 4 5

How do you feel about getting a book for a present?

1 2 3 4 5

How do you feel about spending your free time reading a book?

1 2 3 4 5

How do you feel about starting a new book?

1 2 3 4 5

How do you feel about reading during summer vacation?

1 2 3 4 5

How do you feel about reading instead of playing?

1 2 3 4 5

How do you feel about going to a bookstore?

1 2 3 4 5

How do you feel about reading different kinds of books?

1 2 3 4 5

How do you feel when a teacher asks you questions about what you read?

1 2 3 4 5

How do you feel about reading workbook pages and worksheets?

1 2 3 4 5

How do you feel about reading in school?

1 2 3 4 5

How do you feel about reading your school books?

1 2 3 4 5

How do you feel about learning from a book?

1 2 3 4 5

How do you feel when it’s time for reading in class?

1 2 3 4 5

How do you feel about stories you read in reading class?

1 2 3 4 5

How do you feel when you read out loud in class?

1 2 3 4 5

How do you feel about using a dictionary?

1 2 3 4 5

How do you feel about taking a reading test?

1 2 3 4 5