

## Students' Motivation in an EFL Reading Class

Le Thi Tuyet Minh<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City (UEH), Vietnam

\*Corresponding author's email: [snowle@ueh.edu.vn](mailto:snowle@ueh.edu.vn)

\*  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4344-9321>

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### ABSTRACT

Students' motivation in EFL reading classes is typically low, but little research on students' motivation in EFL reading instruction has been done in Vietnam. There is an open-ended question to solicit the students' suggestions on how to increase their motivation and involvement in learning reading. This research is a case study examining the students' motivation for learning reading in an English-major class (n=34). The tool was adapted from Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) questionnaire of the L2 motivational self system, including ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, instrumentality-promotion and instrumentality-prevention, their attitudes, self-confidence, and intended effort toward learning reading. The findings revealed that the ideal L2 self was identified as the highest motivation, followed by instrumentality-promotion and instrumentality-prevention. Most of the students expressed positive attitudes and relatively high levels of confidence and effort in their learning reading. Finally, the paper offers several recommendations for boosting students' motivation and engagement in reading instructions.

**Keywords:** student motivation, attitudes, reading, engagement

### Introduction

Motivation is considered a primary driving force for the learning process. Studies affirm that motivation plays a vital role in foreign language learning (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1991; Gonzales, 2010; Oxford & Shearin, 1994). In developing the four skills of language learning, reading is generally considered to be boring as the process involves students facing dull texts; students often express low motivation in reading classes. However, little research has been done on students' motivation in EFL reading instruction. This research is a case study exploring the students' motivation and their learning experience in a third-year English-major reading class at UEH University in Ho Chi Minh City. It then proposes ways to improve students' motivation in learning reading. The recommendations can also be employed for any EFL or ESL contexts in general.

## Literature review

### *The theoretical framework of Dörnyei's L2 motivational self system*

The study of motivation in second language acquisition (SLA) has multifaceted perspectives with different models of motivation from different perspectives. This research utilized Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) as the theoretical framework. This model, by Dörnyei and his colleagues in 2005, has been popular in the current trend of motivational research. According to Al-Hoorie (2018), Dörnyei introduced the L2MSS as an attempt to give an explanation for personal variations in language learning motivation. The L2MSS (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009) includes three major components: the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self, and the L2 learning experience. The *Ideal L2 Self* refers to the goals and desires of the language learner. The *Ought-to L2 Self* concerns the obligations and responsibilities the learner believes they ought to fulfill and avoid possible unfavorable consequences. The *L2 Learning Experience* is associated with executive, situational motives connected to the current learning environment (such as the teacher, the curriculum, and peers) and experiences (success or failure).

In addition to the three elements of the L2 motivational system, the other two variables which were examined in this research include instrumentality-promotion and instrumentality-prevention. The term "instrumentality-promotion" describes how L2 learners want to use their language learning to achieve certain positive, pragmatic objectives, like getting a job or going to college, while negative pragmatic outcomes of language acquisition that L2 learners aim to avoid, such as failing an exam, are referred to as instrumentality-prevention.

### *Related Studies*

The L2MSS has been the theoretical framework for a lot of research in motivational literature. Among the pool of the L2MSS research, Papi (2010) studied the correlations between the L2MSS and English anxiety as well as the intended effort to learn English of Iranian high school students. It was found that the ought-to L2 self greatly increased students' English anxiety, while the ideal L2 self and the L2 learning experience reduced it. Roshandel, Ghonsoolt & Ghanizadeh (2018) studies the L2MSS and self-efficacy. The results revealed that the most important predictors of L2 self-efficacy were criterion measures, attitudes towards learning English, instrumentality-promotion, and ideal L2 self. In Malaysia, Tan, Lim, & Hoe (2017) investigated the correlation between the L2MSS and competence in Mandarin. The findings indicated that the majority of students had a high level of motivation for their L2 Learning Experience, which was significantly correlated with their achievement in Mandarin. The result showed that their learning experience, including learning enjoyment, the classroom environment, and the instructional strategy significantly impacted the students' success.

Nevertheless, the studies in the field of learner motivation have primarily concentrated on students' drive to study English in general. The motivation of students to study the four skills individually, including reading, has received limited examination. Moreover, the L2MSS has not been utilized in motivational research in Vietnam. Only a small number of studies employing earlier theoretical foundations investigated the motivation of English majors. Some

doctoral dissertations researched higher education students' motivation using self-determination theory as a theoretical framework. Among those, Phan (2011) studied factors influencing the English majors' motivation for their English studies. Her study identified three key factors that affect students' motivation to learn English, including the perceived values of English knowledge, the English educational environment, and the effect of family and social networks. Ngo (2015) replicated an earlier study by Noels et al. (2001) to examine the connections between motivation and a number of factors (motivational intensity, autonomy, competence, and relatedness) with two samples of English major and non-English major students. The results showed that three types of motivation were demonstrated by the majority of both the English major and non-English major students: personal/professional development motivation (highest levels), intrinsic motivation, and obligation/avoidance motivation. Recently, Khau & Thach's (2021) research on the motivation of 52 senior English-majored students identified the factors developing their motivation. Learning facilities and the teacher's personality were identified as having positive results on the learners' motivation.

No studies have been done on students' motivation to learn reading in Vietnam. Research in literature has focused only on adopting the certain technique to promote students' success in developing the skill, such as Dao (2019), Gorsuch & Taguchi (2008), Nguyen (2020), Nguyen (2022), Pham (2021), Trinh & Ha (2017), and so on. This study contributes to the motivational literature, particularly in the context of EFL reading instruction in Vietnam.

### *Research Questions*

As the L2MSS has still not been popular in language learning motivation research in Vietnam, the writer attempts to adapt the L2MSS in her study so as to contribute to the Vietnamese motivational literature, especially in the EFL reading context. This research seeks to provide light on the English majored students' motivation alongside their attitudes, self-confidence and intended effort in learning reading. It also attempts to solicit suggestions from students for improving their motivation for reading lessons.

The following questions guide the three main parts of this research:

1. What are the students' motivations for learning EFL reading?
2. What are their attitudes, self-confidence, and intended effort in learning EFL reading?
3. What can instructors do to promote students' motivation and interest in learning reading?

## **Methods**

### *Pedagogical Setting & Participants*

At UEH, English-majored students study reading skills in six modules. The course books are Market Leader (3rd Ed.), from Intermediate to Advanced levels. The course length for each module is 30 periods. The subjects were 34 third-year English-majored students (14 males and 20 females) in the author's reading class of module 5 at the University of Economics Ho Chi

Minh City (UEH). Most of them were 21 years old; only one student was 22 years old. The participants studied the first six reading articles of the advanced level and another six articles from the teacher's resource book. Each week the students had one reading session of five periods. The course lasted six weeks. The teacher exploited an integrative approach to teaching.

### *Design of the Study*

The tool was a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire with 18 items adapted from Dornyei's (2005, 2009) L2 motivational self-system to explore the students' motivation, attitudes, self-confidence, and intended effort toward learning reading. There were eight items to explore the students' motivational orientations in learning reading. The questionnaire utilized four types of motivational orientations, including ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, instrumentality-promotion, and instrumentality-prevention; two items were used for each type. For gauging the students' attitudes and self-confidence, each had three items; and there were four items to investigate their intended effort toward learning reading. The questions were modified to suit the teaching and learning context of reading. The items for students' attitudes, self-confidence, and intended effort were mixed up. An open-ended question was added to solicit the students' suggestions on how to increase their motivation to learn reading.

### *Data collection & analysis*

The questionnaire was sent via Google form to the students' emails after the students had taken their final exam. The students were invited to take part in the survey for the sake of course improvement. They were assured that their information was kept confidential and for the purpose of this study only and that the information given in the survey would not affect their scores.

Eight students in the class did not give responses to the questionnaire. Data were analyzed with Excel for Mean and Standard Deviation. A higher mean score indicated a higher level of motivation.

## **Findings and discussions**

### *The students' motivations for learning EFL reading*

The results from Table 1 showed that most items had low standard deviation ( $SD < 1$ ), which indicated that the students were not varied in their motivation to learn reading. The student's motivation to learn reading showed strong levels in all four motivational orientations, with most items having a Mean  $> 4.20$ . The Ideal L2 Self was identified as the highest motivation, while instrumentality-promotion was of the second importance, preceding instrumentality-prevention. The students demonstrated that the Ought-to L2 self was less important than other motivation orientations. The students have ideal L2 self and instrumentality-promotion orientations stronger than the others, probably because they are English-majored students. English-majored students typically have a high level of intrinsic motivation and have predefined English for their future careers.

**Table 1.** The students' motivation to learn reading (n=34)

	<b>Reading is important to me because</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>S.D.</b>
1	I would like myself to be an expert who can understand English texts well. (ideal)	4.38	0.77
2	I can imagine a situation where I take pride in my ability to comprehend written English well. (ideal)	4.24	0.77
3	What I want to do in the future requires me to understand English. (instrumentality-promotion)	4.38	0.87
4	I think I will need it for further studies. (instrumentality-promotion)	4.18	0.82
5	an educated person is supposed to be able to understand English. (ought to)	3.68	1.16
6	reading is a subject that I have to study. (ought to)	4.21	0.80
7	without passing the reading course, I cannot graduate. (instrumentality-prevention)	4.35	0.87
8	I would feel ashamed if I got bad grades in the subject. (instrumentality-prevention)	4.09	1.01

The Ideal L2 self had the highest Mean ( $M = 4.38$  &  $4.24$ ) and the lowest standard deviation ( $SD = 0.77$ ) among the others, which demonstrated the students' intense desire to be an expert in their field and to take pride in their ability. This reflected their strong intrinsic motivation. Additionally, the students were attentive to instrumentality-promotion for their future job and academic pursuits ( $M = 4.38$  &  $4.18$ , respectively). However, the necessity to pass the test was the third significant element in their motivation ( $M = 4.35$ ), which implied that instrumentality-prevention was the other side of the coin that required attention. The students also felt obligated to study as it is required ( $M = 4.21$ ).

The findings were in harmony with Roshandel, Ghonsoolt & Ghanizadeh's research (2017) in the way that they reaffirmed the ideal L2 self and instrumentality-promotion to be among the most crucial elements in students' motivation. The results were also likewise similar to Phan's (2011) and Ngo's (2015) studies in highlighting intrinsic motivation and personal/professional development motivation. However, the students demonstrated that instrumentality-prevention substantially impacted their motivation despite being identified as a less important element than the other two. This result was in line with Ngo's (2015) research, which recognized the obligation/avoidance motive as the third significant aspect.

#### *The students' attitudes, self-confidence, and intended effort in learning EFL reading*

Regarding the students' attitudes toward learning reading, most students enjoyed learning reading with high Mean and low S.D., as shown in Table 2. The students consistently showed

interest and enjoyment in their learning reading. These students were really highly motivated.

**Table 2.** The students' attitudes toward learning reading (n=34)

		<b>M</b>	<b>S.D.</b>
1	I really enjoy learning reading.	4.18	0.71
6	I find learning reading really interesting.	4.09	0.70
9	I like the atmosphere of my reading classes.	4.26	0.78

Results from Table 3 revealed that the student's knowledge of business needed to be strengthened. In terms of their self-confidence in reading, the students felt quite confident in their ability to understand most English texts (M = 4.03& 4.06) although a few students were less secure in understanding business writings (M = 3.82). The students were less confident in comprehending business articles, perhaps because of their lack of knowledge of the business terms or in-depth knowledge of specific business fields.

**Table 3.** The students' self-confidence in reading (n=34)

		<b>M</b>	<b>S.D.</b>
2	I believe that I am capable of reading and understanding most texts in English.	4.03	0.75
3	I believe that I am capable of reading and understanding most English texts about business.	3.82	0.92
4	I am sure I am able to understand most texts in English comfortably.	4.06	0.84

When it comes to their intended effort, it can be seen from Table 4 that most of the students perceived that they made a relatively high effort in learning reading. Their willingness to look for extra materials for reading, to do assignments, or to study hard was reported all above average. However, because nearly 10% of the students indicated a lack of motivation to find more resources to read, the S.D. of this element is higher than the others. This suggested that motivating students to read more be necessary.

**Table 4.** The students' intended effort in reading (n=34)

		<b>M</b>	<b>S.D.</b>
5	If my teacher gave the class an optional assignment, I would certainly volunteer to do it.	3.89	0.87
7	I would like to spend lots of time reading English magazines, newspapers, or books, etc.	3.91	1.01
8	I think that I am working hard at learning reading.	3.82	0.89
10	Compared to my classmates, I think I study English relatively hard.	3.71	0.82

### *The motivational strategy for instructors in EFL reading*

With respect to the students' ideas for promoting their motivation and involvement in learning reading in the open-ended question, they revealed that students' attitudes toward learning depend on the teacher and that the teacher's teaching style and method greatly influence students' motivation and interest in the lesson. They stated that all the teacher needs to do is make the lesson interesting and practical so students are more motivated to learn. In addition, the students showed that they enjoyed games, quizzes, etc., for entertainment. They also suggested the inclusion of some short videos which are hilarious and relate to the lesson so as to attract students' attention to the topic. What is more, they expressed the need for the teacher's instructions on techniques to improve reading skills. On the other hand, the students also suggested having groups present book chapters or articles of their choice for bonus points in order to encourage them to read more. In addition, some expected to have small tests from time to time in order to be prepared for their final test.

These findings were consistent with Khau & Thach's (2021) research, which found that the teacher's personality and teaching style significantly impacted the learners' motivation. To motivate students, teachers must first be highly motivated. Students are more motivated when teachers employ engaging teaching styles and techniques. The findings also agreed with Phan's (2011) about the importance of the educational environment. A supportive learning environment was crucial in promoting students' motivation. A happy atmosphere can create extrinsic motivation for students. In addition, the importance of teaching materials cannot be overstated. Instructional materials, which are necessarily practical and relevant, take an important role in retaining students' interest. Last but not least, affected by the Vietnamese culture of exam-focused learning, students want teachers to pay attention to help them build exam strategies as well as test preparations.

Therefore, the findings suggested four vital aspects in promoting motivation for students, including the teacher, the environment, the materials, and the cultural factor of exam-focused learning.

### **Recommendations**

The findings require that teachers take into account students' Ideal L2 Self and instrumentality-promotion in teaching instruction since the two orientations were identified as the two most important. Teachers should promote students' understanding of English texts, especially English business texts for those whose major is business English. As some students are less secure in their understanding of business articles, teachers must give careful instructions on business terms and vocabulary, grammar, and structures. This enables them to gain expertise and confidence, which secures their Ideal L2 Self and lays the foundation for their future career.

Furthermore, it is vital that the texts be meaningful, relevant and practical in order to motivate students to read. A number of students have low motivational intensity in finding more resources to read. Teachers need to give some encouragement for students to read more, like offering them bonus marks for voluntary presentations of book chapters or articles. Students



can choose the contents they would like to present, and teachers establish a schedule for them to sign up for their presentations.

In addition, influenced by the Vietnamese tradition of exam-focused learning, students emphasize the necessity to pass the test, which is the third significant factor in their motivation. Therefore, teachers need to equip them with knowledge for the test, like the strategies for the exam or some mini-tests to get them prepared for the final exam.

Based on the findings from the open-ended question, it is essential that teachers develop an appealing teaching approach and style because it greatly affects students' motivation and interest in the lesson. Students tend to like entertainment during their long, dull learning in class, so teachers must effectively integrate games, quizzes, riddles, etc., into the lesson. Confucius once said: "Need to study is not as good as like to study like to study is not as good as enjoyment to study." Therefore, educators should bear in mind that enjoyment is the best strategy for teaching and learning success.

## Conclusion

Motivation is a primary factor in SLA, so teachers must promote students' motivation, especially in a long, dull reading lesson. Understanding students' motivation can help teachers prescribe their instructions accordingly, which facilitates the teaching-learning process. While meaningful, relevant, and practical learning resources are crucial, teachers should cultivate an engaging teaching approach to sustain students' interest and motivation. The research had a small number of subjects and did not take into account the students' proficiency as well as other factors like friends and family, etc. Further research can enlarge the scale and probe into the correlations between students' motivation and their achievement as well as a motivation or investigate teachers' specific practices to promote students' motivation and interest in reading.

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### **Biodata**

*Le Thi Tuyet Minh is an English lecturer at UEH University, HCMC City, Vietnam. She holds an M.A. in TESOL. Her main interests are promoting students' motivation and application of ICT.*