

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

MAKING CHOICES:

MOTIVATING ELEMENTARY ESL CHILDREN TO READ

BY

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THIS CAPPING EXPERIENCE DOUCUMENT IS SUBMITTED

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT

OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

SPRING 2006

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

DEPARTMENT OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

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THE DOCUMENT ENTITLED “MAKING CHOICES: MOTIVATING
ELEMENTARY ESL CHILDREN TO READ” SUBMITTED BY YAYING WANG IN
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF EDUCATION.

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RELEASE FORM

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TITLE: MAKING CHOICES: MOTIVATING ELEMENTARY
ESL CHILDREN TO READ

DEGREE: MASTER OF EDUCATION

YEAR THIS DEGREE GRANTED: 2006

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to Dr. Jennifer Branch and Dr. Dianne Oberg for their guidance, assistance, and invaluable comments during the preparation of my capping paper. Without their guidance and assistance, this paper would not have been written.

I would also like to thank my husband and my son for their understanding and encouragement throughout my journey.

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Introduction

It always delights me to see children reading their books with glistening eyes and satisfied smiles at our library. Even more satisfying is the sight of ESL children with their heads buried in books, since reading in English does not always come easily to these children. As a second language teacher and later a public library assistant, I have had opportunities to observe and work with elementary ESL students. It is an exciting experience to be working with these children. Most of them enjoy learning a “new language” and do it amazingly well. Finding the right way to teach these children is important, but I have found that they learn more effectively when they have more freedom to make their own choices.

The first purpose of this paper is to explore what we can do to motivate ESL children to read. The exploration focuses on encouraging the children to make their own choices to self-select reading materials. The importance of ESL children self-selection is discussed in the context of constructivism and motivation theory. The importance of understanding ESL children is also addressed in this paper. The second purpose of this paper is to provide ESL teachers and teacher-librarians with information and recommendations about ESL children self-selection of reading materials to use in their ESL reading and learning programs.

Background to the Study

My embarking on this endeavor is based on my personal experiences and was initially inspired by constructivist educational theory that I studied throughout my Master of Education program in teacher-librarianship at the University of Alberta.

English is my second language. Although I first learned English in elementary school in China, I only started to truly read English books as a young adult in junior high school. Since coming to Canada, I have become a lifelong learner. As an adult ESL learner, I have continued to learn English due to the demands of my daily life and education. My English learning experience can roughly be divided into two stages: an early stage in China as a child ESL learner and a later stage in Canada as an adult ESL learner.

My early English studies in China were mainly instruction oriented until later on when my English became good enough to read children's books at the beginner and intermediate levels. During that time, my English teacher assigned reading materials and it was mandatory for me to read them. I was not always interested in reading the English books that were assigned by my teacher. The books were often too difficult to understand, sometimes even with the help of a dictionary. As I recall, I had an especially hard time with these difficult and uninteresting books. This "hard time" ended with the Chinese Cultural Revolution. During the Chinese Cultural Revolution, all schools were closed. Most of the books were discarded and they were piled high on the ground like a garbage heap. Fortunately, I had opportunities to access these discarded books and picked out lots of books that I was interested in from these "garbage heaps." I was so happy that I was able to look for my favorite books, and I had plenty of free time to read the books that I had selected myself since the schools were closed. I had a lot of fun reading many children's English books during that time, books including children's versions of *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and so on. Many of the books

I chose were picture books or bilingual books. One day, I accidentally found an English picture book (it was similar to a comic book). Unfortunately, the book was damaged, without the title pages and the ending (this was quite common during that special period). I started to read it and was soon engrossed in the story. I will never forget how disappointed and frustrated I was when I found out the ending was missing. I tried very hard to find the ending of this story without success. Many years later, I was receiving picture books for the Calgary Public Library and I found a book which reminded me of this story. I immediately scanned most of it until I reached the “lost ending.” I was so relieved and satisfied after finishing the story. The title of the book was *The Beauty and the Beast*. The Chinese version had been cut off at the part where the beast was dying because the girl did not return before the enchanted flower wilted.

I remember that English picture books and bilingual books were my favorites and they were the most beneficial during my early English studies. These books were easy to read and easy to understand. I loved to read English books that I had selected by myself and I had fun learning English.

My English studies in Canada have been mainly motivated by the demands of both education and daily life. As an adult ESL learner, even with a certain background of English, I have been on a rollercoaster of frustration and joy throughout my learning experiences. Now, I enjoy reading everything from textbooks and journal articles for academic learning to hairstyle and decoration magazines for pleasure. My personal learning experiences give me a better understanding of the ESL children.

Throughout my studies in the teacher-librarianship program, I have learned about combining educational theory with educational practices in a research process. Through course projects and educational research, I have found constructivist philosophy and motivation theory to be of particular interest to me. In a constructivistic environment, the students have more freedom and control over their learning. They are encouraged to take an active role and self-direct their learning. In this learning environment, the students' learning is motivated naturally. Under such an environment, the roles of teachers and teacher-librarians are also significant: the teachers and teacher-librarians set goals and provide learning guidelines and resources as well as support and suggestions for students' learning activities. Throughout the study, my personal belief about how children learn best has evolved. My original beliefs were mainly affected by the oriental education system of transmission. I have observed that transmission is also very common in Canadian education system. Constructivism offers a divergence from traditional oriental teaching and learning environments that are primarily teacher-driven, where students mainly memorized what teachers taught. In constructivistic environments emphasis is on the students to construct their own meaning through their learning activities. It's more student-centered and self-directed. Constructivism differs from traditional learning methods, according to Johnson, Peck and Wilson (1999), in its concepts of reality, meaning, learning and knowledge (see Figure 1).

I believe that constructivist philosophy and motivation theory can lead us to a better educational approach, since students are intrinsically motivated to learn in these situations. Also, such environments offer authenticity to educational methodologies.

Figure 1. Constructivist vs. Traditional Learning Methods

| | Constructivist | Traditional |
|--------------------|---|--|
| Reality ⇨ | Product of mind | External to the knower |
| Meaning ⇨ | Reflects perceptions and understanding of experiences | Reflects external world |
| Learning ⇨ | Engaged in cooperative learning process Knowledge construction, interpreting world, constructing meaning, process-oriented | External process Knowledge transmission, reflecting what teacher knows, well-structured, product-oriented |
| Knowledge ⇨ | Constructed | Transmitted |

(Adapted from Johnson, Peck and Wilson, 1999, p.7)

My learning, working and personal experiences have led me to the field of ESL learning where I specifically look at how motivating it can be to allow the ESL children to self-select reading materials. In regards to ESL reading, each ESL student is unique. All readers have different personal experiences, personal interests, reading styles and varying levels of English language proficiency. A constructivistic environment allows for this diversity. It also allows for the nurturing of individual spirits by providing an atmosphere that promotes reading with interest that has relevance for each individual learner.

Definitions

The following terms will be used in this paper.

ESL Children

ESL stands for English as a Second Language. The term ESL children used in this paper include K-6 students who come to Canada from other countries speaking languages other than English. These children have varying levels of English language proficiency, and they face challenges in reading and writing in their regular classroom.

ESL Teacher

This term refers to a professional teacher, who has special training in English as a Second Language and has specialized in the ESL curriculum. The ESL teacher teaches ESL educational programs in the K-12 school system.

Teacher-librarian

Teacher-librarian refers to a professional teacher who has additional training in the management and development of a school library and its programs. Teacher-librarians play a vital role in educating students to improve student learning and achievement.

Ten-Finger Method

This method is adapted from the “five-finger method” and associated with the self-selection of reading materials by ESL children. The method includes the following process: an ESL student opens up a book to any random page and begins reading. As he/she reads, the student will put up one finger for each word with which he/she is not familiar. If the child finishes the page and is holding all ten fingers up, it means that particular book is too difficult for her or him. If he/she is holding no fingers up, the book

choice is too easy. If there are five or six fingers held up, the difficulty level of the selection is probably appropriate for the child.

Reading Style

Reading style considers how a reader's ability to learn and to read is affected by the reading environment and by the reader's emotionality, sociological preferences, physical needs and style of processing information. ESL children have their own unique reading styles. For example, to gain a better understanding of reading material, ESL children usually pay more attention to detailed information and tend to read more slowly.

Review of the Literature

In this review, constructivism and motivation theory in relation to second language learning are introduced. Current applications of the theory in second language education and the importance of reading are examined. Making choices and self-selecting reading materials are specifically investigated.

Importance of Reading

In recent years, the numbers of ESL students have been increasing in the school population across Canada. As Robertson (2005) states, in many of Canada's cities, every teacher is an ESL teacher. Vancouver, with a student population that is one-fourth "officially" ESL, is one such example (p. 411).

In Alberta, "Our classrooms look very different these days. As an elementary teacher you may find that your classroom is a global village of many cultures and

languages. Students with English as Second Language (ESL) needs are part of almost every school population in Alberta” (Alberta Education, 1996, p. 7).

According to Statistics Canada (2004), “among 1990s immigrants, 310,000 were children between the ages of 5 and 16. For many of these children, the first language learned and used at home was neither English nor French” (p. 1). This study also found that these children were more likely to start school with less-developed reading, writing and mathematics skills than their classmates who learned English as their first language “These students offer a rich resource of diversity that can enhance classroom dynamics” (Drucker, 2003, p. 22). However, they also present challenges to educators. How can we help these children improve their English language skills and achieve curriculum goals in their regular classroom? What strategies will most effectively contribute to their learning in schools? “The educational success of ESL learners has become the topic of an increasing number of studies” (Watt & Roessingh, 2001, p. 203). Watt & Roessingh (2001) pointed out

That ESL learners remain disadvantaged in high school and that graduation remains an elusive goal for the vast majority of these students. And yet, their success in developing English language proficiency and completing high school is critical to their participation in Canadian society and economy, especially 10 years from now when the renewal of the workforce will become critical as the baby boom generation retires. (p. 203)

To prepare the ESL children for a productive life in Canada, assisting their educational success has become a serious concern in the Canadian education system.

“Of all school learning, success in literacy, especially reading, is certainly among the most important achievements for all students due to its key role in academic learning and consequent social and economic opportunities” (Peregoy & Boyle, 2000, p. 237).

Reading plays a vital role in personal life in Canada. A 2005 national survey regarding reading and buying books was conducted and reported for Canadian Heritage. The survey clearly shows that reading is an activity that is deeply rooted in the lives of Canadians. Eighty-five percent of people who took part in the survey stated that “reading is very important to them” (Canadian Heritage, 2005, p. 9). Eighty-three percent of people feel “that it will be very important in the next decade to possess good reading skill” (Canadian Heritage, 2005, p. 9). Reading is an essential skill for learning. “When children read, they activate their capacity for imagination, for creative and critical thinking, and for empathy. The skills they build through regular and sustained reading open up possibilities for success in later schooling and beyond” (Gambrell, 2004, p. 1).

Current studies have shown that reading has profound cognitive consequences: the more children read, the better they get (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2003; Johnson & Blair, 2003; Stanovich, 2000). Cunningham and Stanovich (2003) stated that “All of our studies have demonstrated that reading a lot is effective regardless of the level of a child’s cognitive and reading ability ... Even the student with limited reading and comprehension skill will build vocabulary and thinking skills through reading” (p. 35). Reading is beneficial for every one, including second language learners.

For the past century, social scientists, psychologists, linguists, educators and librarians have been studying reading. We now know an awful lot about reading. How we acquire this skill and how important it is to our success in school and future careers ... This enormous body of research has also shown that good readers acquire second languages more easily. (MacDonell, 2004, p. 30)

Nothing is more important to academic achievement than being a good reader. Reading is fundamental and it will lead children to succeed in their learning. I believe that reading will open the world to every child. Each child comes to be a reader in different ways. Some children can read easy books at an early age. Some don't get the hang of it until they reach school age. Others will struggle along for many years. This does not matter. What does matter is that children are motivated to read and have opportunities to become fluent readers and, as a result, good learners. As with native English speaking children, reading is an essential skill for ESL children.

Constructivism

As one of the learning theories, constructivism focuses on the learner's concept development and deep understanding rather than behaviours or skills (Fosnot, 1996). Constructivism is mainly based on the work of Piaget and Vygotsky. Piaget's cognitive constructivism contends that learning is a dynamic process of contradiction and equilibration and that learners have to construct their own knowledge through experience. Vygotsky's social constructivism puts more emphasis on the social context of learning. He focuses on the effect of social interaction, language, and culture on

learning. Vygotsky “argued that the most effective learning occurs when the adult draws the child out to the jointly constructed potential level of performance” (Fosnot, 1996, p. 20). Overall, constructivism could be defined in this way: "Meaning is not given to us in our encounters, but it is given by us, constructed by us, each in our own way, according to how our understanding is currently organized" (Duckworth, 1987, p. 112).

According to constructivism, students play an active role and are the center of the learning process. Students may not necessarily master the knowledge just by memorizing. They have to construct knowledge based on their own experiences. The educator’s role is to provide a positive learning environment and resources and to provide guidance whenever necessary, in contrast to traditional classrooms where the teacher's role is to pass on knowledge to learners and students just absorb information passively (Good & Brophy, 1991; Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986).

Based on the theory of constructivism, the following five general principles of learning were proposed by Fosnot (1996):

- Learning is not the result of development; learning is development.
- Disequilibrium facilitates learning.
- Reflective abstraction is the driving force of learning.
- Dialogue within a community engenders further thinking.
- Learning proceeds toward the development of structures. (pp.29-30)

Jonassen (1994) suggests the following eight principles to guide instructional design in constructivist learning environments:

1. Provide multiple representations of reality
2. Represent the natural complexity of the real world
3. Focus on knowledge construction, not reproduction
4. Present authentic tasks (contextualizing rather than abstracting instruction)
5. Provide real-world, case-based learning environments, rather than pre-determined instructional sequences
6. Foster reflective practice
7. Enable context and content dependent knowledge construction
8. Support collaborative construction of knowledge through social negotiation

(p. 35).

The way to do this is through methodologies that are constructivist in nature.

Educators need to abandon their need for control and delivery and allow students more freedom in making choices and taking an active role in their learning.

Motivation Theory

Dornyei (2003) explains that motivation theory concerns what we do and the reason behind it. By definition, motivation is the entire set of factors that compel an individual to respond (Spafford, Pesce, & Grosser, 1998). Motivation can be classified as intrinsic or extrinsic. Extrinsic motivation prompts an individual's action with external factors such as reward or punishment (Noels, Pelletier, Clement, & Vallerand, 2003); intrinsic motivation inspires action with internal factors such as the feelings

associated with exploration, achievement, and personal interest activity (Noels et al., 2003).

Currently, there are several motivation theories in second language learning. Gardner's theory is perhaps one of the most influential ones. According to this theory, second languages are mediating factors between different ethnolinguistic communities in multicultural settings and the primary motivation to learn the language of the other community is to enhance intercultural communication and affiliation (Dornyei, 2003). This theory emphasizes the integrative aspect, that is, the motivation to learn the language of other communities is due to the desire to respect and value the culture and ways of life of other communities and due to the willingness to be integrated into the other communities (Gardner, 1985).

Another important motivation theory in this area is Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Vallerand, 1997). In this theory, based on the degree of self-determination, the motivations are grouped into intrinsic motivations (IM) and extrinsic motivations (EM) with each group being further divided into three types. The three IM types are IM-Knowledge, IM-Accomplishment, and IM-Stimulation with similar degrees of self-determination. The three EM types in order from lowest to highest level of self-determination are EM-External Regulation, EM-Introjected Regulation, and EM-Identified Regulation.

Attribution theory is another contemporary motivation theory (Weiner, 1992). According to this theory, our motivational disposition is heavily affected by how we attribute our past successes and failures subjectively. For example, if students believe that a past failure is due to their inability, it is unlikely that they will try it again.

However, if they believe that the failure is due to not investing enough effort, it is almost certain that they will not give up. According to the goal setting theory, students who set specific and difficult goals will outperform the students with nonspecific and easy goals (Locke & Latham, 1990).

Based on these motivational theories, a student with intrinsic motivation, with positive attitude towards success and failure, and with specific goals is most likely to excel in learning second language. Grounded in the motivational theories, a series of strategies for motivational teaching practice are recommended by Dornyei (2003). The strategies are divided into four groups: creating the basic motivational conditions; generating initial student motivation; maintaining and protecting motivation; and encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation. Each group of strategies involves multiple practical approaches to guide second language education.

The importance of motivation in students' learning is not only emphasized in theoretical research but also recognized by more and more classroom teachers and educators and used to guide their routine teaching to foster motivated students. According to the motivation theory, teachers and teacher-librarians play an important role in nurturing motivated students by providing positive learning environments. Based on the results from past research, Gambrell (1996) specifies six factors that affect students' motivation to read: the teachers as an explicit reading model; a book-rich classroom environment; opportunities for choice; opportunities to interact socially with others; opportunities to become familiar with lots of books; and appropriate reading-related incentives. Morrow and Weinstein (1986) reported that a pleasure-oriented reading program promoted elementary students' interest in reading. Subsequently,

Morrow (1992) showed that a pleasure-oriented reading program improved elementary students' literacy achievement.

Based on both constructivism and motivation theory, I propose the need to provide plenty of choices to the ESL students in their English learning. According to constructivism, the role of teachers or teacher-librarians is to provide guidance and facilitate students to construct knowledge based on their own experience. Similarly, motivation theory suggests that teachers or teacher-librarians develop the positive learning environment to intrinsically motivate students' learning.

Research on Self-selection

As indicated above, making choices for self-selected reading materials is one of the important factors in nurturing students' intrinsic motivation to read. Allowing children to self-select reading materials is a powerful motivator for children (Kragler & Nolley, 1996).

Letting children choose their own reading material is based on Olson's 1959 theory of child development. According to his theory, children are self-seeking, self-selecting, self-pacing organisms. The basic point of this theory is that children will seek and select from the environment experiences that are consistent with their developmental levels. With educators' guidance, they will pace themselves through these learning experiences. Children will self-select books at levels that are appropriate for them as well as pace themselves through their chosen reading materials (Kragler & Nolley, 1996).

Generally, educational researchers support the value of choice in learning. Many studies have concluded that choice is a powerful motivator for children and has a positive impact on their learning (Cho & Krashen, 2001; Cho & Krashen, 2002; Cullinan, 2000; Johnson & Blair, 2003; Kamii, 1991; Kohn, 1998; Kragler & Nolley, 1996). “Previous studies have shown that recreational self-selected reading has a strong impact on reading comprehension, grammar, and writing in first and second languages.” (Cho & Krashen, 2002, p. 162). Cho and Krashen (2002) conducted a study on reading improvement of ESL children, and their study has shown that, when children are allowed to choose their own materials, they are more motivated to read. The results of their study strongly suggest that providing access to interesting books and allowing children to select books themselves can have a profound impact on interest in reading and can result in substantial growth in overall English language. Cho and Krashen (2002) stated that “What is clear to us is that self-selected, recreational reading deserves to be done much more widely than it currently is” (p.162). When real world readers choose a text, they are reading to learn and to enjoy (Johnson & Blair, 2003).

Swartz and Hendricks (2000) also emphasize the importance of choice. They pointed out that all students are different and each student has his or her own preferences in selecting reading materials and that students tend to become motivated readers if they are allowed to choose their own books. The importance of choice should not be overestimated, especially for ESL students who have such different personal interests, unique needs, and life experiences. Based on my personal observation, children who are allowed to choose their own reading materials often enjoy reading. When children are interested in their reading material, they improve in learning.

Drucker's 2003 study found that students learn to read well when they are engaged in reading materials that are not only at an appropriate level but also interesting and relevant to them.

There are some similarities between reading in a first language and reading in a second one. Accomplished readers in their first language tend to use many of the same strategies that successful native English-language readers do-skimming, guessing in context, reading for the gist of a text-when they are reading in a second language. (p. 22)

Choosing something interesting is the most powerful motivator to children, and it has a positive impact on children's learning. "In fact, it is the 'interestingness' of the books that leads to enjoyment and increases in positive attitudes toward reading by children" (Johnson & Blair, 2003, p. 183). The best way to motivate ESL children to read is to allow children to self-select their reading materials to satisfy their interests. Having children self-select their reading materials is especially beneficial in the ESL reading situation. "Students who were allowed and encouraged to choose their own reading material expended more effort in learning and understanding the material" (Gambrell, 1996, p. 21). By self-selecting reading materials, the ESL children can choose books of interest at their appropriate level. They have more control over their reading and their reading activities become more individualized. Self-selecting reading materials can reduce stress and alleviate anxiety for the ESL children when they read in English, and it can also build up their confidence by reading books that interest them. "Enjoyment of a book cannot be forced on a child; it must come about naturally" (Johnson & Blair, 2003, p. 182).

One literacy educator suggested that reading processes in a second language may not be significantly different from those in a first language (Fitzgerald 1993, 1995a, 1995b). “A research study comparing struggling readers with average and above-average readers revealed some surprising information. The findings consistently showed that struggling readers are motivated by the same things that motivate high-level, proficient readers: choice in reading material, sharing aloud, and positive recognition” (Gambrell, 2004, p. 2). These researchers, as well as others, demonstrated that the reading process of ESL children is similar to that of children with English as a native language. The same things that motivate native English-language readers also motivate ESL children.

However, learning from reading for the ESL children differs from those of native English-language children. After systematically analysing research on cognitive reading processes of ESL learners in the United States, Fitzgerald (1995a) generalized that, while the cognitive reading processes are similar in both native English speakers and ESL learners in general, there are some differences. For example, “They used similar metacognitive strategies and monitored their comprehension when reading, and identified antecedents in text equally well” (Fitzgerald, 1995a, p. 180). On the other hand, ESL readers “used fewer metacognitive strategies and favoured some different ones, verbalized metacognitive strategies less, recalled subordinate ideas less well, monitored comprehension more slowly, and did reading tasks more slowly” (Fitzgerald, 1995a, p. 181).

Motivating Reading in Practice

Struggling with language is a common problem for most ESL children, especially when they are in a new classroom and have to adjust to their new learning

environment. The problem stems from linguistic and cultural differences. ESL children are often unwilling to read in English since reading does not always come easily or naturally. At our libraries or in ESL classrooms, when I pull out a title and ask the children to read, I often see some ESL children wrinkle their noses or knit their brows, or I see them reading with frustration. This constantly presents challenges for me. I know that if children have fun reading, they will keep reading and learning. If they read with frustration, the books won't keep them long and they will sooner or later give up their reading. We need to find ways to motivate these children to read. I often ask myself the two following questions:

1. What can we do to alleviate or eliminate ESL children's anxiety with reading?
2. How can we motivate these children to read and develop their reading skills in an enjoyable and entertaining ways?

Self-selecting Reading Materials

Research has shown that students learn to read well when they are engaged in reading materials that are not only at appropriate English proficiency level but are also interesting and relevant to them. The way to do this is through educational methodologies that are constructivist in nature. ESL teachers and teacher-librarians need to allow the students more freedom and control over their own learning. The best way motivating ESL children to read is to allow them making their own choice to self-select their reading materials to satisfy their interests.

Traditionally, ESL teachers or teacher-librarians select books for ESL children to read. They often feel that ESL children are unable to self-select reading materials due to their limited English language proficiency. It is true that in order to build high quality ESL collections and provide good learning resources, ESL teachers and teacher-librarians' book or resource selections are an extremely important aspect of the ESL learning because they as educators know about the kinds of books or resources that will be appropriate and attractive to their particular students. However, differences exist between adult and children's choices. Agnew (1996) found that adults choose books for their educational value, and children choose books for interest, often wanting something fun and easy.

As educators, adults focus on the result of children's reading, but children focus on their interest and enjoy the process of reading. However, in a constructivistic learning environment, these two different focuses can be unified. Giving children choices to self-select reading materials allows children to have fun reading and learning. It brings success in the children's learning that can be celebrated by both the children and the educators together. In practice, I have also found that it is really hard for adults to choose appropriate books for ESL children. One problem is that ESL children vary in age, cultural heritage, and life experiences. Each child is unique and has very different interests. Selecting books that appeal to every ESL child is often difficult, if not impossible. Another problem is that these children's English proficiency, reading ability and reading levels are different. Although I think meeting every ESL child's individual needs is very important, it is also difficult to choose books at an appropriate level for each of them. If the books we choose are too easy for them, the children will lose

interest and they won't read it. If the books we choose are too difficult, the children will become frustrated, and they won't keep turning the pages. In a study to evaluate the effect of a reading program McGlenn and Parrish (2002) suggested that reading materials for ESL learners should not be too difficult, i.e., ESL learners should be able to comprehend at least 80% of the content of the reading materials. With this type of materials, anxiety is at low level and ESL students are better able to acquire language (p. 176). I believe that if children are given choices, the children can find interesting books to meet their own reading level naturally.

Research has shown that children's interests is one of the important factors that influenced children's book selection. Moss & Hendershor (2002) carried out a study to investigate the factors that influenced grade six students' selection of non-fiction trade books. The results revealed the following six influencing factors:

1. Curiosity about topic
2. Visual features of the text
3. Knowledge of authors and intertextuality
4. Knowledge of book awards and genre
5. Personal connections
6. Other readers (p.12).

It is essential that teachers and teacher-librarians know the ESL students' special needs and their unique interests. "When you know what they can do, then you can find ways to move them forward in their learning. When you know where they struggle, you can provide more support and in turn give them success with literacy tasks in the classroom" (Johnson & Blair, 2003, p. 185).

To motivate the ESL children to read, I have tried to satisfy each ESL child's interests and individual needs. I achieved this by getting the children to self-select books that they find interesting. Based on the five-fingers method for native English readers, I adapted a "ten-finger method" to teach the ESL children to self-select their own reading materials. The reason for increasing the number of difficult words to 10 is simply because many ESL students start with a limited vocabulary. The following chart of the ten-finger method illustrates how to self-select books by ESL children (see Figure 2).

The "ten-finger method" can be used by ESL children to self-select reading materials that provide sufficient challenges yet also interests them enough to maintain their attention. Through practice, this method not only teaches ESL children to self-select reading materials, but also helps the children to have fun learning.



Building a Supportive Environment for ESL Reading

A supportive environment is a key factor in learning a second language (Alberta Education, 1996). A supportive environment includes:

- Having access to good teaching
- Developing an effective ESL learning program
- Providing high quality children's collections that support ESL self-selected reading
- Creating a safe, comfortable, and stimulating physical ESL reading area
- Promoting a positive mental environment


Figure 2. Ten-Finger Method

Ten - Finger Method





Please follow the instructions:

- 1. You open a book randomly to any page.**
- 2. Begin reading.**
- 3. Put up one finger for each word with which you are not familiar.**




When you finish reading the page, you are holding up all ten of your fingers. This means that this book is too difficult for you.



When you finish reading the page, you are holding up five or six of your fingers. This means that this book is appropriate for you.

When you finish reading the page, you are not holding any fingers up. This means that this book is too easy for you.



Teachers and teacher-librarians can stimulate ESL children's desire to read by surrounding them with fun and interesting reading materials that are related to their life experiences and their English language level.

ESL Collection Development

In order to support the ESL children's self-selection of reading materials, we must build a wide variety of rich, ESL-children's collections in terms of both genre and formats. In case of a limited budget, collections from other libraries (e.g., a public library) can be considered. When developing a collection for ESL children, I always keep one thing in mind: the collection must be interesting, diverse and English language level-related. I also try to balance the types of books with the content of the books. I believe all types of books should be available for the ESL children, especially picture books, easy reading books and fiction/non-fiction with illustrations. Books should contain new vocabulary but should be at a level that promotes reading fluency. In fact, no single aspect or characteristic can be used to evaluate an ESL children's collection. In selecting books for the ESL children's collection, I use as guidelines the ten factors in the following chart (see Figure 3).

Strategies to Encourage ESL Reading

One of the most important prerequisites for motivating ESL children to read is ESL teachers and teacher-librarians' encouragement and guidance. The ESL teachers and teacher-librarians can create effective reading programs that offer a wide range of

Figure 3. Guidelines for Selecting for the ESL Children Collection

Guidelines for Selecting ESL Children Collection

1. Consider the length of the book, the number of words, and the number of lines on the page. For ESL children, the shorter the better.
2. ESL children like books that have a large font and clear spaces between words and lines.
3. Select books that provide pictures or illustrations to help the children gain meaning. Picture or illustration support gradually decreases.
4. Books use high frequency words, text with regular spelling words, and content words supported by pictures or illustrations.
5. Select books that have simple plots and some repetition.
6. Books begin with very simple sentences and go on to include longer, more complex sentences with embedded clauses.
7. Consider topics and themes that connect with the ESL children's lives.
8. Select bilingual books with popular titles.
9. ESL children like books that have an attractive book cover.
10. Choose a variety of books that will provide opportunities for the ESL children to improve their reading skills and knowledge through experiencing diverse reading materials.



activities such as:

- Instructional reading. A short and brief introduction guides and supports comprehension from the start of the ESL children's reading and also helps them to enhance the children's reading skill.
- Reading aloud to help the children understand the structure of written language.
- Reading together in a small group, expand their knowledge of words and learn new ways of using language.
- Reading freely helps them to become independent, get more practice, and choose books for themselves.

Creating a Positive Physical Environment to Motivate ESL Reading

“One of the most significant needs in a classroom encouraging student self-selection of literature is an appropriate physical environment” (Johnson & Blair, 2003, p. 184). Teacher-librarians and ESL teachers can create an ESL reading area in the library. Using displays that allow the children to see the book covers will help them make better choices for reading. Pillows and soft chairs should also be included in this area so that the children can feel safe, comfortable and more relaxed when they read.

Educators also need to promote a positive mental environment to support the ESL learning. Educators must be very familiar with children's collections and their ESL children. Knowing where to find the right types of books for the ESL children is the first step. One way the educators can find out about quality literature suitable for ESL reading is by consulting websites that are related to children's literature, such as the children's literature web guide, the reading zone of the Internet public library, and professional online children's book review resources. It is also essential that educators

know the ESL children's special needs and their unique interests. "There is nothing like reading to promote reading" (Drucker, 2003, p. 27). In order for ESL children to become life-long learners and flexible problem-solvers, they must have a good command of language.

Conclusion

The increasing number of ESL students in the Canadian school population presents new challenges to educators. Helping these children improve their English language skills so that they can achieve their regular curriculum goals in school and prepare for a productive life in Canada has become a serious concern in the Canadian education system.

Constructivist learning theory suggests that, students have to construct knowledge through their own experiences. The role of teachers and teacher-librarians is to facilitate the students' knowledge construction process. Motivation theory suggests that a student with intrinsic motivation, a positive attitude towards success and failure, and specific goals is more likely to excel at learning. Choice and self-selection are two of the most important factors in nurturing students' intrinsic motivation to construct knowledge on their own. Similarly, according to Olson's 1959 theory of child development, children will seek and select from environment experiences that are consistent with their developmental levels. I have found that self-selecting reading materials not only motivates the ESL children to read, but also encourages the children to become more active readers and independent thinkers.

Based on published research and my personal experiences, the following strategies are recommended:

- The ten-finger method can be used by ESL children to self-select reading materials that are of interest to them.
- When building an ESL collection, the following three key factors should be addressed

1. Consider the length of the book, i.e. the number of words, and the number of lines on each page.
2. Consider topics and themes that connect with ESL children's life experiences.
3. Choose a variety of books that will provide opportunities for ESL children to improve their skills and knowledge through experiencing diverse reading materials.

- ESL teachers and teacher-librarians can create effective reading programs that provide a wide range of activities which may include:

1. Instructional reading
2. Reading aloud
3. Reading together in a small group
4. Reading freely

- ESL teachers and teacher-librarians can build a supportive environment that encourages ESL reading, by providing high quality children's collections that support ESL self-selected reading and by creating a comfortable and stimulating physical ESL reading area.

In order for ESL children to become life-long learners and flexible problem-solvers, they must have a good command of language. Combined with the guidance and support of ESL teachers and teacher-librarians, allowing children to self-select reading materials could have positive impact in this aspect and encourage ESL students to become self-motivated learners and thinkers.

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