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Relating Adolescents' Second Language Reading Attitudes, Self Efficacy for Reading, and Reading Ability in a Non-Supportive ESL Setting

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to investigate the relationships among second language reading attitudes, reading self-efficacy, and reading ability, as well as gender differences across the variables among adolescents in a setting that does not foster English as second language (ESL). Two hundred sixteen-year olds completed a translated version of the BJP Middle/Secondary Reading Attitude Survey and an English reading-comprehension measure. Overall, L2 reading ability was found to be somewhat mediocre, L2 reading self-efficacy was low, and attitudes were not positive. While there was no significant gender difference in self-efficacy, girls showed somewhat more promising attitudes, and comprehended significantly better. The study supports the expectancy value model of reading and previous findings of positive correlations among the three variables. Having established that both L2 reading attitude and efficacy have significant roles in reading improvement in a non-supportive ESL setting, some challenges and pedagogical suggestions were identified, including addressing automaticity and capitalizing on authentic online intercultural exchanges.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescent English literacy development is largely discussed in the context of L1 literacy or L2 literacy in native English-speaker settings (Alvermann & Eakle, 2003; Snow & Biancarosa, 2003), where the need for reading in English is relatively unquestionable. As the use of English as an international language continues to expand, sociolinguistic contexts of English-language learning have become diverse, not all of which are supportive of its use. The vitality of a national language, for instance, may reduce adolescents' need for English as second language (ESL), thereby reducing motivation to read in it.

Planning for effective ESL reading instruction requires good understanding of factors affecting reading ability in specific contexts, so that local needs, constraints, and learner variables can be adequately addressed. This research re-examines basic interrelationships among reading attitudes, self efficacy, and ability in a specific non-native context where English is a compulsory school subject and the second-most important language in education, but not the

main medium of instruction, nor widely used in the community. The wider aim is to provide some informed pedagogical considerations for educators in similar settings.

Reading Attitudes

Various reading models have proposed how reading attitudes (i.e., favorable or unfavorable feelings about engaging in reading) may influence a reader to readily approach reading, sustain or abandon a reading task, or avoid a reading situation altogether. Mathewson's (1994) model, which is based on a tripartite view of attitude, suggests that attitude toward reading encompasses evaluative beliefs about reading, feelings about reading, and readiness to read. These three components in Mathewson's model are expected to influence intention to read or continued reading, as well as further affect aspects of reading behavior such as attention, strategy use, and reading comprehension.

The McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth (1995) model of reading attitude acquisition, while taking into account Mathewson's constructs, addresses the possibility that social structure and environment may also affect reading attitude. This expectancy value model of attitude postulates that normative beliefs (e.g., how one's social group views reading), beliefs about the outcomes of reading (pleasurable, boring, useful, etc.), and specific reading experiences influence attitude. Reading ability, according to McKenna et al. (1995) is related to beliefs about the outcome of reading. At the same time, ability is also linked to the reader's perception of the value of reading, which is very much contextually defined. If the value of reading is perceived to be low, "the development of reading ability will be constrained" (p. 939). Conversely, a positive attitude and a strong value attached to reading are expected to help a weak reader persevere and succeed in the task.

Applying first language theory to second language reading attitudes, Day and Bamford (1998) identified four sources of attitude toward second language reading: attitude toward first language reading, second language reading experiences, attitudes toward the second language and its culture and speakers, and the second language classroom environment. Taking the expectancy value perspective, their model highlights reading ability in the second language as an expectancy factor, and attitude toward L2 reading as a value factor that motivates the decision to read in the second language. They add that L2 readers should expect to be able to understand what they read before they will want to read. Both Day and Bamford and the McKenna et al. model link the reader's perception of the value of reading with reading ability. L2 readers, who in most instances are struggling learners of the language, may place a low value on reading as a way of avoiding reading frustration.

Empirical studies have shown that the relationship between attitudes and reading ability can differ according to age group or education level. In their study of young L1 readers, Kush, Watkins, and Brookhart (2005) found no relationship between the two variables, whilst Conlon, Zimmer-Gembeck, Creed, and Tucker (2006), who studied adolescents, found a small but significant variance in reading comprehension explained by reading attitude. Among bilingual readers, there appears to be a tendency for more positive attitudes toward reading in the L1 compared to the L2. However, this does not necessarily have an adverse effect on L2 reading as preexisting positive L1 reading attitudes appear to readily transfer from L1 to L2 (Yamashita, 2004). Thus, attitudes toward foreign language reading can emerge as favorable, even when reading frequency is low (Crawford Camiciottoli, 2001; Yamashita, 2004).

While research has shown that positive reading attitudes relate to better comprehension among EFL readers at the Tertiary Level (Ghaith & Bouzeineddine, 2003), it is less clear

whether the tendency would prevail among adolescent EFL learners. In the latter age group, a host of factors can be expected to temper second language reading attitudes, among them competing interests, recreational choices, academic curricular demands in the L1, as well as the inability to relate to reading as a social activity (Bokhorst-Heng & Pereira, 2008).

Self Efficacy in Reading

Self efficacy is regarded as an important variable in student achievement, in addition to knowledge, skill, value, and expectation (Schunk, 2003). The motivational-cognitive model of reading (Guthrie & Wigfield, 1999) specifically highlights self efficacy in reading, “the reader’s sense that he or she has the capability to read effectively” (p. 201), as one of the motivational processes influencing text comprehension. Efficacy beliefs, among other beliefs, determine activity choice as well as one’s willingness to expend effort in the activity concerned (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). Self-efficacious readers tend to be avid readers who are motivated to read. On the other hand, struggling readers, who are acutely aware of their slower reading speed as well as their incomplete understanding of what they read, will be more likely to think twice about picking up a book. This, in turn, is detrimental to the improvement of their reading efficacy and ability in the long run.

Self efficacy has been found to correlate positively with reading achievement in the first language (McQuillan, 2000), and self-efficacious readers are not only performing better but also more likely to persist through difficult reading tasks (Wigfield, Guthrie, Tonks, & Perencevich, 2004). At the same time, as Schunk (2003) points out, effective academic learning does not require extremely high efficacy beliefs since overconfidence may lead to reduced efforts to learn, and consequently be detrimental in the long run. In a recent study, Swalander and Taube (2007) found that reading attitude had moderate effects on reading ability, and correlated with verbal self concept and general self efficacy.

Relationships between attitudes, self efficacy, and achievement specific to reading have been less researched in non-native user contexts. However, some studies point to the possibility of positive relationships. For example, Huang and Chang (1996) have observed that overall language achievements of their ESL learners corresponded to perceptions of their own ability. Interestingly, Bokhorst-Heng and Pereira (2008) found that having generally positive attitudes did not mean that L2 readers would rate their self perceptions as readers equally high. Their study was conducted in an exam-oriented setting where English was the medium of instruction in school.

Gender

Findings regarding gender differences in both reading attitude and efficacy have been quite consistent. Girls are observed to have more positive reading attitudes at all learning levels (Hogsten & Perogoy, 1999; Kush & Watkins, & Brookhart, 2005; McQuillan, 2000; Crawford Camiciottoli, 2001; Yamashita, 2004). Girls also tend to be more efficacious (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997) and more able readers, even from a very young age (McCoach, O’Connell, Reis, & Levitt, 2006).

The literature suggests that reading attitudes and self-efficacy beliefs generally relate to ability, and are associated with the value placed on reading. The latter can be directly or indirectly linked to situational factors. In ESL/EFL situations where there is minimal exposure to

English outside the school environment, reading in English, more often than not, serves the utilitarian purpose of fulfilling schoolwork demands. In these contexts, readers have plenty of alternative (L1) reading resources to rely on should they not want to read in the L2, further reducing motivation for voluntary or leisure reading. In these contexts, the problem of the vicious circle of the weak reader (Horner & Shwery, 2002; Nuttall, 1996) is a common phenomenon—a student who does not read well in the L2 will probably read less in that language and thus remain a poor reader. Relationships between reading attitudes, efficacy, and ability have not been well researched in this non-supportive L2 reading environment.

Study Setting

English is a second language in Malaysia, and a wide variety of electronic and print materials, local and imported, are readily available in English both in and out of school. Although Malaysians living in large cities and hubs of international business may choose to use English extensively in both professional and personal domains, there is a limited need for English in the chosen setting in north Malaysia. For adolescents here, English is required mainly for the relatively narrow purpose of school, as their local dialect and the standard national language, Bahasa Malaysia, effectively fulfill most, if not all, of their communicative needs in both formal and informal domains. Thus, the use of English outside the classroom is more a matter of personal choice rather than necessity.

STUDY PURPOSE AND METHOD

The aim of the study reported here was to investigate the relationships among second language reading attitudes, reading self-efficacy, and reading ability, as well as gender differences across the variables among adolescents in a setting that does not foster ESL. The study involved 200 Form Four (10th grade) 16-year old Malay students from two small-town schools and three rural schools. Stratified random sampling was used so that 20 boys and 20 girls of mixed English-language ability were selected from each school. The students had been exposed to English as a school subject from Year One (1st grade), and as a medium of instruction for mathematics and science from Form One (7th grade). Most mathematics and science teachers code-mixed in Bahasa Malaysia and English in class to ensure understanding. At the time of this study, these students had the option of answering exam papers in the two subjects either in Bahasa Malaysia or English.

Reading attitude and efficacy were measured by a 16-item questionnaire, adapted and translated into Bahasa Malaysia from the BJP Middle/Secondary Reading Attitude Survey (Baldwin, Johnson, & Peer, 1980), and pilot-tested for internal consistency-reliability (see Tables 2 and 3 for the questionnaire items). Translation was necessary to ensure that the statements would not be misread by students who lacked English proficiency. Adapting from McQuillan (2000), 12 items on the BJP were taken as a general measure of attitudes toward reading, and four items were used to measure self-efficacy beliefs. All questionnaire items referred specifically to reading in English. The use of a modified version of an established instrument would allow some comparisons with past findings. In addition, the BJP was of a reasonable length, which was necessary since the reading-ability measure had to be administered in the same sitting due to school constraints.

The BJP scales comprised a mix of negatively and positively worded items rated on a five-point scale (strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree). In data coding, the scores on the negatively worded scales were reverse weighted for consistency so that high scores represented positive attitudes and high self-efficacy, and vice versa. The translated instrument yielded an overall Cronbach's alpha of 0.76. Alpha values were slightly higher for the attitude sub-scales (0.74) compared with the efficacy sub-scales (0.63).

L2 reading ability was measured by a reading-comprehension test, comprising two short English-language reading passages, one sourced from a national standardized English achievement test for 9th graders (252 words, topic was local minority culture), and the other from a published model test (163 words, topic was tropical wildlife). The Flesch Kincaid grade-level measures for the texts were 10.5 and 5.8, respectively. Each informational/descriptive text was followed by six multiple-choice questions, yielding a total possible score of 12 points.

The survey was administered by the English head of the study schools. Subjects completed the questionnaire, then immediately took the reading-comprehension test. Independent *t*-tests and Pearson correlations were used to measure the relationships between the independent and dependent variables.

RESULTS

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics for overall L2 reading attitude, perceived self efficacy for L2 reading, and L2 reading ability for the sample computed over all scales. In interpreting the scores, attitude and self efficacy in reading was taken as a continuum of negative to positive perceptions (on a scale of 1 to 5), with a mean of 3.0 determined as neutral attitudes and average self efficacy.

Group means on the attitude and efficacy scales fell in the mid to low range. A neutral to negatively inclined score was observed for reading attitude ($M = 2.99$, $SD = .55$). The mean for L2 reading was comparatively lower ($M = 2.44$, $SD = .74$). Group means for L2 reading ability was in the average range ($M = 7.59$, $SD = .3.16$). It was also noted that the range of scores was extremely wide.

Table 1. Group Means for Attitude, Efficacy, and Reading Ability

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min Score	Max Score
Attitude	2.91	.55	1.58	4.33
Self Efficacy	2.44	.74	1.00	2.75
Reading Ability	7.59	3.16	1.00	12.00

L2 Reading Attitude

Means and standard deviations were also computed for responses on each scale, and ranked to show which statements the subjects tended to agree and disagree with, thereby providing a clearer picture of the nature of the responses (Table 2).

Table 2. L2 Reading Attitude: Rank-Ordered Means and Standard Deviations ($N = 200$)

Item	Statement	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
2	Reading in English is a waste of time.	3.99	0.97
14	I like to have time to read English in class.	3.31	1.14
9	I do not have enough time to read English books.	3.16	1.14
13	Teachers want me to read too much in English.	3.02	1.15
1	English library books are dull.	3.01	1.05
15	Reading in English gets boring after about ten minutes.	2.89	1.31
11	I would like to belong to an English book club.	2.81	1.09
3	Reading in English is one of my hobbies.	2.78	1.04
7	I enjoy going to the library for English books.	2.44	0.93
5	Reading in English is almost always boring.	2.37	0.97
12	I like to take English books home.	2.27	0.97
16	I like to read in English before I go to bed.	2.07	0.95

Ratings on these individual attitude statements reveal a lack of strong attitudes about L2 reading in English in either direction. Subjects felt most strongly that reading in English was a waste of time (2), and would not want it for relaxation (16). While reading in English was not strongly perceived as boring (5, 15), there was a general reluctance to commit much time to reading in English (9, 13), for pleasure (11, 3, 7) or at home (14). These responses point to a generally low voluntary effort to read in English. Nevertheless, the idea of allocating class time for reading in English (14) was not disagreeable to these adolescents.

L2 Reading Self Efficacy

Table 3 summarizes the students' ratings on the four individual self efficacy items. Although the students tended not to perceive themselves as poor readers (10), and did not believe that younger kids read better than they did (6), they essentially did not feel that they were better readers than their peers (4) or older students (8).

Table 3. L2 Reading Self Efficacy: Rank-Ordered Means and Standard Deviations ($N = 200$)

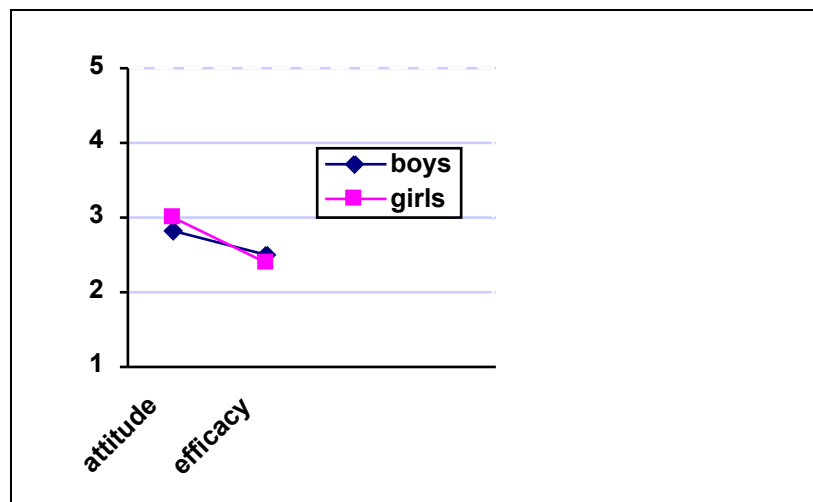
Item	Statement	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
10	I believe that I am a poor reader in English.	2.68	1.23
4	I believe that I am a better reader in English than most other students in my grade.	2.37	0.97
6	Sometimes I think kids younger than I am read better English than I do.	2.36	1.06
8	I can read in English as well as most students who are a year older than I am.	2.36	1.01

Gender Differences in L2 Reading Attitudes, Self Efficacy, and Ability

Group means for both boys and girls were moderate to low on both attitudes and efficacy. However, girls' reading attitudes tended to be slightly more positive ($M = 2.99$, $SD = .50$), compared to boys' ($M = 2.83$, $SD = .60$). Although both groups displayed low reading self

efficacy, boys reported a higher mean ($M = 2.49$, $SD = .79$) compared with girls ($M = 2.39$, $SD = .70$). Figure 1 illustrates the converse patterns of attitude and efficacy for boys and girls in the sample.

Figure 1: Tendencies in L2 Reading Attitude and Reading Efficacy among Boys and Girls



However, as seen in Table 4, independent t-tests revealed that the gender difference was only significant for attitude ($t_{(198)} = -2.05$, $p < .05$) but not for efficacy ($t_{(198)} = .93$, $p > .05$). For reading ability, girls yielded a higher mean score than boys (boys $M = 7.15$; girls $M = 8.03$), with the difference just reaching significance level ($t(198) = 1.98$, $p < .05$, Table 5).

Table 4. Results of *t*-Test for Differences in L2 Reading Attitudes and Self Efficacy by Gender

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Attitudes	2.83	.60	2.99	.50	198	-2.05*	.042
Self Efficacy	2.49	.79	2.39	.70	198	.93	.354

Note: * $p < .05$, two-tailed; boys, $N = 100$, girls, $N = 100$

Table 5. Results of *t*-Test for Differences in L2 Reading Ability by Gender

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Score	7.15	3.20	8.03	3.08	198	1.98*	.049

Note: * $p < .05$, two-tailed; boys, $N = 100$, girls, $N = 100$

Relationships among L2 Reading Attitudes, Self Efficacy, and Ability

Pearson correlation analysis yielded a significant positive correlation between the respondents' L2 reading attitudes and reading scores ($r = .50$, $p < .01$), showing that the more positive the attitude towards reading in English, the stronger the reading ability (Table 6).

Table 6. Zero-Order Correlations between L2 Reading Attitude, Efficacy, and Ability ($N = 200$)

	(1)	(2)	(3)
(1) Reading Attitude	1.00		
(2) Reading Self Efficacy	.35**	1.00	
(3) Reading Ability	.50**	.29**	1.00

Note: ** $p < 0.01$

Similarly, self efficacy also showed a significant positive correlation with ability ($r = .29$, $p < .01$), although the relationship was slightly weaker than the attitude-ability relationship. Reading attitude and perceived efficacy were also positively correlated ($r = .35$, $p < .01$), that is, students with more positive attitudes toward L2 reading are likely to display higher levels of reading self efficacy in the L2.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated English L2 reading attitudes, reading self efficacy, and reading ability among adolescents in a non-supportive ESL environment where there was a general lack of demand for the use of English outside the classroom. A somewhat neutral attitude was found among the adolescents, indicating an indifference toward reading in the L2. Lenters (2006) proposes that apathy toward reading can be construed as a response to perceived irrelevance. Adolescents in this study, who were already literate in an L1 that sufficiently fulfils their immediate literacy goals both in and out of school, most likely saw less value in L2 literacy. Mori (2002) identified four theoretical constructs of motivation that work specifically in EFL reading contexts: (1) intrinsic value (enjoyment) for reading in English, (2) attainment value (need for succeeding), (3) extrinsic utility (usefulness), and (4) expectancy for success (efficacy beliefs). We suggest that in this non-supportive setting, more than one of these facets of motivation may have contributed to the apathy. L2 reading not only lacked intrinsic value, it was also not vital for success in school. Furthermore, past research has shown that struggling readers may construct protective barriers against feelings of failure, which would have a negative impact on reading achievement (Patterson & Elliot, 2006 as cited in Bokhorst-Heng & Pereira, 2008).

The significantly more positive attitudes toward reading in English among girls is consistent with the research reviewed earlier. However, a closer inspection showed that girls' responses to the individual attitude scales hovered in the neutral range. This clearly indicated that the lack of enthusiasm for reading in English beyond the classroom applied to both boys as well as girls. Yet, despite the general apathy, reading in English was not always perceived as uninteresting, and students remained quite receptive to additional reading time in English class. Such perceptions are very similar to those of L1 reluctant readers (see Lenters, 2006), and is a positive sign that although the immediate social need for English literacy is low, these adolescents may still find some relevance of English as an auxiliary language, and can be motivated to read in it, given appropriate classroom intervention. Overall, the findings highlight the applicability of the expectancy-value model of reading to a non-supportive L2 literacy environment.

Significant positive correlations were found among reading self-efficacy, attitudes, and ability. Kush et al. (2005) explain that reading attitudes develop through repeated successes and failures in reading experiences over time, and that attitude and achievement become closely linked *only after repeated failure*. Their prediction that attitude would emerge as a determinant of L1 reading ability by the time children reach adolescence is also upheld. The positive relationship found between self efficacy, achievement, and attitude is succinctly explained by McCrudden, Putney, and Perkins (2005) who assert that with higher self efficacy beliefs and interest, learners are more likely to persist in their reading tasks. This would increase the amount of practice in reading, which in turn would result in improved reading skills and better comprehension. A positive attitude would be all the more essential in L2 reading in non-supportive settings as learners need to persevere, applying various skills and strategies to construct meaning, despite the additional cognitive and affective challenges posed.

The study also found that boys displayed a slightly higher level of L2 reading self efficacy, though not significant. This could have been due to the nature of the items, as boys have evidenced a tendency to rate more positively on “competition” scales (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997).

PEDAGOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this research reaffirm known relationships among reading attitudes, self efficacy, and ability. They underline the importance of building positive attitudes and efficacy beliefs as part and parcel of reading development, regardless of sociolinguistic setting. In L1 situations, students who resist reading in school have been found to value real-world reading more, and thus would be motivated to read out of school (Lenters, 2006). In non-supportive L2 environments, however, the social contexts of L2 literacy are limited. Thus, the lackadaisical attitude, mediocre ability, and low efficacy found were not unexpected. The school has a substantial role to play in addressing these factors in L2 literacy development, through programs that integrate skill and strategy training with enhancing motivation to read, so that apathy toward L2 reading will be alleviated.

In designing and implementing L2 reading programs, ESL/EFL syllabus designers and teachers should not neglect the fact that L2 readers begin reading with a much smaller store of vocabulary, syntactic, and discourse knowledge. As automaticity in reading and effectiveness comprehension are less likely to be achieved without reaching a certain language proficiency level (Hudson, 2007), more attention should be given to seeking and using materials at appropriate language levels, and to developing bottom-up fluency skills among struggling readers (e.g., via timed reading and rapid recognition exercises). These would help reduce attention to lexical access and encoding processes, and free up the reader’s working memory for comprehension. In large classes, grouping readers of similar proficiency levels during reading activities so that more effective automaticity development work can take place at a suitable pace would go a long way toward developing reading confidence. As L2 students, such as those in this study, find in-class reading time agreeable, *sustained silent reading* can be carried out. Grabe (1991) points out that providing long periods of silent reading would contribute toward building vocabulary and structural awareness, developing automaticity and comprehension skills, and increasing reading motivation and self-efficacy beliefs. Applying task- or problem-based

approaches in ESL/EFL would help students work meaningfully with information, and help them read in the L2 for authentic purposes.

Lenters (2006) stressed the importance of listening to the voices of students if educational institutions wished to minimize negative attitudes and resistance to reading. Allowing adolescents to choose topics they want to read about, and access and share information to solve problems they find meaningful would serve to increase involvement and motivation. As Schunk (2003) points out, *experiencing* would decrease anxiety and increase self efficacy. To prevent students from developing apathy as a coping mechanism, it is also important for literacy educators to allocate time to demonstrate the usefulness and relevance of reading (Alvermann & Eakle, 2003). This is especially relevant in the face of competing literacies. Reading-strategy instruction should also be given priority: McCrudden et al. (2005) have shown how explicit strategy instruction and practice can quickly develop student motivation in at-risk students in the L1 context.

For language classrooms that employ task- or problem-based learning approaches, an additional challenge for the teacher in a non-supportive setting would be to ensure that it is L2 reading, rather than L1, which predominates when students are involved in independent information seeking sessions. To this end, collaborative projects incorporating intercultural-international peer exchanges of information online would be helpful, as would reading across the curriculum, involving other subjects taught in English, where available. Al-Jarf (2006) and the Asia-Europe Foundation-supported culture capsule project (<http://www.culturecapsule.org/>) provide some exciting ideas on authentic second language and cultural-exchange projects that are likely to add a real-world feel to classroom English, and at the same time develop motivation and interest in L2 communication. Projects like these effectively open up the adolescents' restricted L2 world, and would serve to compensate for the non-supportive immediate social context.

Many ESL/EFL teachers in exam-oriented educational systems would admit to the pressure of having to spend a great deal of class time on teaching for exam preparation, and the frustration of having to sacrifice the cultivation of the intrinsic value of reading for its own sake. Despite the reduced likelihood of fostering long-term positive reading attitudes, teachers in exam-oriented settings can take comfort that self-efficacy beliefs can still be effectively enhanced. Schunk (2003) suggests that in an environment where long-term benefits of reading are unclear to the student, teachers may want to focus on immediate performance goals for reading skill and strategy development, as well as stress the value of specific reading strategies during strategy training. Barkley (2006) further adds that learning goals that are achievable within a lesson period—small successes—combined with positive feedback, even when experiencing failure, are likely to promote positive self-efficacy beliefs, and indirectly motivate students to read in the long term.

The significant positive relationships among L2 reading ability, reading attitudes, and self-efficacy beliefs emphasize the need to foster positive attitudes and self efficacy for L2 reading improvement. In linguistic settings with minimal need for L2 use, most teachers are presented with the additional challenge of helping learners find agency and a place of relevance for L2 reading in school and in their lives. Regardless of whether they teach in exam-oriented or regular classrooms, ESL/EFL teachers in non-supportive settings should strive to create opportunities for their students to experience a sense of personal growth as a second language reader, so that self efficacy, and attitude will be positively affected and abilities enhanced.

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