

FOSTERING STUDENT MOTIVATION: SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING WITH THE “READING TRAIN”

This week’s teaching tip demonstrates how to use a combination of student choice, friendly competition, a visual display with a fun theme, and rewards to motivate students to read more in English.

Students choose English language materials to read from a class library, a school library, or teacher-suggested Internet resources; students can read items during extensive/free-reading periods in class or on their own time outside of class. Students then write short summaries about and personal responses to what they have read. Student reading responses are captured on forms containing a train car-shaped outline. Each contribution is posted on the wall, making an addition to an ever-growing class “reading train.” The reading train serves as a visual symbol that recognizes students’ effort and progress toward becoming avid readers. To motivate students to read in their free time, teachers can conduct a competition and offer small rewards to students who contribute the most “cars” to the reading train in a given time period.

LEVEL

Upper beginner and above

- The example in this teaching tip is designed for younger learners, but the concept can be adapted for older students by creating a “reading chain” that uses forms with plain circles or squares to capture reading responses instead of train cars.
- Teachers can increase the activity’s difficulty by adapting the reading response forms to include more advanced reporting, analysis, and personal response items.

GOALS

Generate student enthusiasm about reading by:

- Encouraging them to read and respond in a level-appropriate way to materials they choose.
- Encouraging them to engage in extensive reading during class and in their free time.

ASSOCIATED MOTIVATION FACTORS

Instructional design and promoting learner autonomy: incorporating student choice; encouraging self-directed learning

Creating a positive classroom environment: creating healthy competition and using a reward system; recognizing/celebrating student progress with a classroom display and reward ceremonies

Teacher behavior and knowledge: conveying enthusiasm about reading in English as you explain and manage the reading train

MATERIALS

- Teacher:
 - Whiteboard or chalkboard

- Markers or chalk
 - Level-appropriate English language reading materials
 - Reading train engine printout (example provided)
- Students:
 - Pencils or pens
 - Crayons or markers (optional)
 - “Reading train” response forms (example provided)

PREPARATION

- If you don’t already have a classroom library from which students can borrow materials, create or curate a set of English language reading materials that are age- and level-appropriate for your students. Considering seeking help from your school librarians, who may be able to provide a list of available English language materials; the librarians may also be able to order or locate resources for you, if needed. If your students have access to the Internet in the classroom, in the school library, in a computer lab, or at home, you can create a list of acceptable online reading resources for them. Be sure to review the [American English website](#) and [American English mobile app](#) for free e-reading materials to include on this list.
- Adapt the reading train response form if needed. You can use the example form provided with this teaching tip, or you can create a similar form that is tailored to your reading objectives and learner level. Print several copies of the form; keep a stack of them available near the classroom library or in a folder in a known location in the classroom. If copying forms isn't possible, create a master form to display in the classroom and let students draw the train outline and copy the form content onto their own paper.
- Prepare the area on the wall that will feature the reading train. You can print, color, and post the train engine (provided with the example response form) to be the front of the train. Post a few blank response train car forms behind the engine to illustrate how the train will look as it grows.
- Decide the reading train contest rules, timeline, and rewards: Each car on the reading train is worth one point. Pick a minimum number of points students must have in a given timeframe. (Example rules: all students must earn two points per month by reporting on two books read during in-class extensive reading time; students who read more than the minimum number collect more points. At the end of the month, the three students with the most points get a small reward such as extra points on a quiz, a homework pass, their name displayed on a “Reading Superstars” board, candy, etc.). You can also offer a cumulative reward if desired (the top reader for the term gets a new book, set of pencils, etc.).
- Prepare to draw or electronically display a large version of a blank response form on the board as you explain the idea to the class. (Procedures – Step 3)

PROCEDURES

1. To get students excited about reading, explain that you are going to work together to build a “reading train” over the course of the term. Direct them to look in the area in the room where you have posted the train engine and example cars. Tell them that while the train looks very small right now with just an engine and a few cars, all of the students in the class are going to help it grow as part of a reading contest.

2. Explain that each time students read an English language book outside of class or during free reading/extensive reading time in class, they can add a car to the reading train by completing a response form.
3. Display a large version of the response form on the board (example form shown here; adapt as needed for your students):

Book Title: _____

Your Name: _____

Main characters: _____

Setting: _____

This book was about (2-3 sentences): _____

One thing I liked about this book (1-2 sentences): _____

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4. Demonstrate how to complete the form: explain each field on the form and work together with students to write in the needed information for a book the class has all read (a book you have read aloud, an assigned book from earlier in the course, etc.). Tell students they can decorate their train cars with crayons or markers before they turn them in for review.
5. Explain the contest rules you set during the preparation phase: tell students that each car on the train (each book read) gives the reader a point; set the minimum number of points required for each reader in the given timeframe; explain how to earn more points; and explain the contest rewards.
6. Explain where students can find acceptable reading materials (class library, school library English language books, approved online e-books, etc.). Emphasize that they can choose any book from acceptable sources that seems interesting or exciting. The goal is to have fun and read a lot!
7. Show students where blank response forms will be kept (or how to make their own form if you are using that option). Tell students where and when they should turn in completed forms for you to review and post on the wall.
8. Answer any questions students have about the contest.
9. As the contest progresses, review and post student submissions on a regular basis. To keep students engaged, be sure to occasionally direct their attention to the reading train: praise the class for how it is growing, ask students to talk about the books they've read, give updates on which students are in the lead, and encourage others to make an effort to add to the train before this round of the competition ends.
10. At the end of each contest timeframe (monthly, end of term, etc.), celebrate the winners in front of the class by having a brief ceremony to announce/display their names and hand out rewards. Remind students that reading is its own reward (so everyone wins!), and challenge them to participate in the next round of the contest.