

## UNIVERSITY READING: HOW DO WE TURN IT ON?

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*Universities and colleges are experiencing increasing challenges of educating millennial students, individuals who lack motivation and tenacity to engage in the learning process. Ideally, university students have read materials and are prepared to engage in collegial interaction. The purpose of this study was to determine whether university students are preparing for class and whether instructional reading strategies are effective to engage them in meeting course requirements. Results indicated that participants overwhelmingly do not read prior to class, but with research-based interventions, millennial students engaged in reading assignments and obtained content information relevant to the course.*

*Keywords: university reader, reading engagement, reading instruction, reading intervention*

According to Monaco and Martin (2007), the *millennial student* represents a generation of learners that push to achieve, rely heavily on technology to obtain information, and work through support systems to achieve learning. Strauss and Howe (2003) describe the characteristics of the millennial generation: special, sheltered, confident, conventional, pressured to achieve, and team-oriented. Moreover, millennial students are the largest and most diverse groups of individuals in college today and require a host of academic needs. Effective instructional approaches will ultimately include facilitative instruction, technology integrated into learning, applicable and real-world context, and group collaboration as well as independent learning experiences and ownership (Crone & MacKay, 2007).

The success of all students, especially reluctant and struggling readers, relies greatly on the teacher's ability to implement solid instructional strategies shown to enhance motivation, learning, knowledge, and skills. However, many times teachers fall into routine teaching practices such as lectures that isolate and disconnect content. This directly affects an individual's motivation to read both text and content information. Furthermore, without effective academic approaches and interventions, student readers, in general, may experience reading and learning difficulties. Student achievement heavily depends on the teacher's effectiveness in implementing positive class interactions and experiences while providing instruction through routine effective teaching strategies (Gambrell & Marinak, 2009; Kroeger, Burton, & Preston, 2009).

In general, when designing instruction, teachers must cautiously select and construct appropriate reading assessments, approaches, and interventions with regard to students' development and acquisition of basic reading skills. Moreover, reluctant readers and those who struggle to read need additional focus placed on specific skills, especially at their reading level, to promote reading development, engagement, and motivation. In essence, to support all students toward reading success, teachers must utilize instructional strategies that work and produce favorable results (Kroeger, Burton, & Preston, 2009; Paris, 2005; Arlington, 2002).

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

Many students experience reading difficulties in school due to a variety of reasons such as language, learning, and attention issues. Furthermore, effective types of reading interventions to engage and teach young learners are well-documented; however, little information is available on how best to motivate college-aged students (Connor, Bickens, & Bittman, 2009). In fact, a relevant factor to consider is that college-age students with learning disabilities are the largest and fastest-growing population of individuals with learning difficulties. With this in mind, college instructors must contemplate how best to design and deliver their courses while infusing reading, motivation, and learning strategies (Culatta, Thompkins, & Werts, 2007).



## READING STRATEGIES

Published proceedings from the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (2010) note that reading involves a variety of skills and knowledge that are essential for comprehension. Effective readers are able to 1) decode and read fluently; 2) develop vocabulary knowledge and oral language skills; 3) connect and incorporate other disciplines to build deeper meaning while reading; 4) use a range of cognitive learning strategies; 5) make inferences and analyze content; and 6) engage in mental effort and motivation in order to achieve academic goals. Though there are a multitude of effective approaches, basic reading processes involve activating prior knowledge, predicting, questioning, visualizing, clarifying, rereading, constructing meaning, and summarizing or describing main points of what was read.

Reading strategies and interventions can be developed and implemented in a variety of formats to ensure that readers are grasping concepts, making connections, and engaging in the learning process. Uses of multiple modalities such as tactile, auditory, visual, and kinesthetic approaches are recommended when presenting instructional content. For example, during the first instructional tier, student participation and engagement could be established by utilizing basic writing elements, such as having students “fill-in-the-blank” to establish primary information such as objects, names, places, dates, etc. The second instructional tier could be designed so information is exchanged in pairs or small groups. During these learning opportunities, each student could share what he/she has read or knows about the topic while also listening and gathering information from others. An array of reading strategies can also be integrated while students work together, depending on their individual needs and reading abilities. Another suggestion would be to color-code or highlight materials to place emphasis on a particular idea or instructional focus.

Ultimately, learning should always extend beyond general knowledge, details, and facts and will involve more in-depth understanding and application. Therefore, regardless of the reading strategy or approach, the process must elicit interest, engagement, motivation, and cooperation. More importantly, reading and learning strategies should allow for a range of product-based outcomes, such as presenting, applying, problem solving, and summarizing, to measure learners’ competencies (McCarney & Wunderlich, 2006).

## METHODS

### Reading Interventions

This study incorporated a variety of research-based reading interventions to engage participants in reading course content. The goal was to incorporate reading strategies and approaches most likely to enhance university students’ participation, reading, and learning. These involved Jig Saw, Cooperative Learning, Graphic Organizer, Carousel, Ticket-Out-Of-Class (Quiz), and Prompt Questions (see Table 1).

These specific reading strategies were chosen because the approaches are well-established with K-12 readers and documented through research. However, research has mostly been conducted with young readers, and limited information is available in relation to strategy effectiveness among university readers. In any event, research strategies for this study have been shown to exhibit a strong fidelity in accurately producing intended outcomes with regard to reading comprehension among most young readers of various learning abilities and traits. Therefore, the instructors/researchers hypothesized that using effective strategies implemented with K-12 students would address university students’ reading difficulties and motivation.

Additionally, these particular reading approaches were ones that each instructor/ researcher or any university instructor could easily learn and freely access (i.e. at no cost for creation or production). Reading strategies for this study were considered ideal because they could be incorporated within the instructor’s existing curricula. Moreover, the reading intervention approaches used for this study were chosen to help model cooperative learning approaches to participants, who were pre-service teachers completing an education course.

**Table 1*****Intervention Strategy Descriptions (PaTTAN, 2004)****Graphic Organizer*

Topic information is provided on charts, graphs, or diagrams; students may access specific facts or complete statements, opinions, reflections, etc.

*Jig Saw*

Students are divided into base and expert groups. Each person from base group joins an expert group, gains information, and returns to share with base group. Activities for sharing include: reading, writing, speaking, listening, and interaction.

*Prompt Questions*

Pairs or triads of students are asked to read and respond to a specific topic or instructional focus provided by the teacher. After small group collaboration, information is shared among class.

*Carrousel*

Small groups respond on a titled poster using different color markers. Groups rotate to each poster adding information or contributing responses. When posters are completed, the teacher facilitates information from posters for large group discussion to discuss key points and add new responses if needed.

*Ticket-Out-Of-Class (Quiz)*

Short assessments covering key topics of discussions or ideas are given at the end of class. Students may leave class after completing a brief written response.

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## Participant Selection

Voluntary participants attending the University of Central Arkansas and enrolled in pre-admission teacher education courses were invited to participate in this study, which included 299 undergraduate university students (i.e. sophomores, juniors, seniors). Participation involved 1) engaging in reading intervention strategy and 2) completing a survey questionnaire following intervention. Participants were primarily native to south central Arkansas (97%), mostly Caucasian (95%), predominately female (80%), and their ages ranged between 19-44 years. Other participants included non-Arkansas natives, African-Americans (< 4%), and non-English speakers (< 2%).

## Methods and Data Collection

The instructors served as researchers for this study and were responsible for several items related to data collection. First, the instructor/researcher began by teaching their individual course. Second, the session was followed by implementing one of the reading intervention strategies. And third, once the intervention was complete, a survey was administered to each student participant.

**Implementing Reading Strategies.** When instructors used the Jig Saw Method, they divided a reading assignment into four sections. Each section was then assigned to an individual within a base group to read prior to the next class session. At the following class session, individuals shared the key reading content with their peers in the base group. Instructors then summarized with the groups in a whole-class discussion.

Instructors selected and provided a specific organizer page to each student before assigning reading content. In the subsequent class meeting, university students brought their completed Graphic Organizer page to class. The instructor used the organizer page to complete a class discussion or review.



Instructors designed several Prompt Questions based on a selected assigned reading. University students were asked to read the material before class met, using the questions to aid reading comprehension. When meeting with the class again, the instructor used the students' responses to the prompt questions in small group and whole group activities.

Using the *Carousel Strategy*, the instructors assigned university students a reading selection to be read prior to an upcoming class meeting. Upon entering the class, students in each group were given a different colored marker. Individuals in each group wrote responses to topics and questions with their colored markers. Each topic or question required at least one response from each group, and contributions were monitored by the differentiated colored markers. Instructors facilitated the class by summarizing and noting key points.

Instructors designed two or three questions from a reading assignment for an upcoming class period. Students were not informed in advance that there would be a short quiz. The simple, two-to-three question quiz was administered to each student in attendance at the next class meeting. The instructor collected the quizzes as the students exited the class; hence, the quiz was their *Ticket-Out-of-Class*.

It is important to note that that every student enrolled in the course received instruction and participated in the reading strategy; however, only those participants choosing to volunteer were administered a questionnaire survey (after using the strategy at the end of class) to provide responses about the intervention. Questionnaires were collected by instructors/researchers and values were tabulated, assigned, and placed into graphic representations. Only responses received through surveys were used to determine participant preferences and perceptions of intervention effectiveness.

**Survey Questionnaire.** An anonymous questionnaire consisting of eight items requiring participants to place an "X" next to a "yes or no" response was administered by researchers. Selected items required a written open-response elaborating on personal detail. No penalty was ascribed to any responses on the questionnaire or affected participants in course. The questions were as follows:

1. Do you read all of your textbook assigned reading to be prepared for classes every or on most days?
2. Did you participate by reading your assigned section?
3. Did you retain (learn) the information from your assigned section?
4. Do you believe that you learned the material that other groups read and presented well enough to use the information later in your work?
5. Would you like to use the reading intervention in class again? Why or why not?
6. Are there other strategies that motivate you to read class-assigned materials and, if yes, what are they?
7. Name any other instructor's methods that you have used that have helped you to attain all the reading needed for your classes.
8. Explain how this strategy may help a student with a disability/learning problem.

## RESULTS

### Analysis of Survey Response

Participants were invited to share whether or not they engaged in reading prior to class. Approximately 66% indicated that they usually did not read assignments in preparation for class; however, reading strategies implemented in the study indicated an overall increase in engagement among participants due to opportunities to interact and share with others in small groups. Over 90% of participants engaged in both *Jig Saw* (see Table 2) and *Carousel* interventions (Table 3). The *Prompt Questions* (Table 4) produced 60% participation among students; however, the *Graphic Organizer* (Table 5) resulted in slightly above 50% involvement.

**Table 2**

***Numbers of University Students Responding to Jig Saw***

	Yes	No
Read All/Most Assignments	65	19
Participated in <i>Jig Saw</i>	81	4
Retained Information	75	9
Found the Learning Useful	54	29
Want to Use Intervention Again	72	11
Like Additional Strategies	46	38

Total (n=84)

*Note.* The difference in total numbers is due to a non-response to an item.

**Table 3**

***Numbers of University Students Responding to Carrousel***

	Yes	No
Read All/Most Assignments	39	58
Participated in <i>Carrousel</i>	90	5
Retained Information	90	5
Found the Learning Useful	82	14
Want to Use Intervention Again	73	20
Like Additional Strategies	60	30

Total (n=97)

*Note.* The difference in total numbers is due to a non-response to an item.

**Table 4**

***Numbers of University Students Responding to Prompt Questions***

	Yes	No
Read All/Most Assignments	12	65
Participated in <i>Prompt Questions</i>	52	25
Retained Information	70	7
Found the Learning Useful	68	9
Want to Use Intervention Again	63	12
Like Additional Strategies	33	34

Total (n=77)

*Note.* The difference in total numbers is due to a non-response to an item.

**Table 5**
**Numbers of University Students Responding to the Graphic Organizer**

	Yes	No
Read All/Most Assignments	14	29
Participated in <i>Graphic Organizer</i>	18	23
Retained Information	32	12
Found the Learning Useful	24	9
Want to Use Intervention Again	42	2
Like Additional Strategies	8	23

Total (n=44)

*Note.* The difference in total numbers is due to a non-response to an item.

Due to the qualitative nature of the *Ticket-Out-Of-Class* (Quiz), data was formulated into descriptive themes. Themes were regenerated and categorized multiple times to describe participants' (n=47) level of involvement with reading course content. Three major themes describing readers emerged: the *Expert Reader* (n=7), who are those that gained the most insight related to content; the *Moderate Reader* (n=16), representing the majority of participants who read the average amount to produce adequate responses related to the reading intervention; and, the *Hesitant Reader* (n=24), or readers who did the minimum preparation to enhance quality of knowledge and information related to the reading content.

### Reading Interventions Results

Results indicated that the *Jig Saw* and *Carousel* were most effective in application for university classroom use, as more than 90% of participants engaged in learning by participating in reading activities. However, the least relevant strategy among participants was the *Graphic Organizer*, which indicated the least amount of participant reading involvement. Both the *Prompt Questions* and the *Ticket-Out-Of-Class* (Quiz) reading approaches were moderately successful among the majority of participants.

Most participants reported that they retained the information with each of the reading strategies. Overall, 90% reported successful retention of reading content using the *Carousel* method; 80% reported successful retention using *Prompt Questions* and *Jig Saw* strategies; and the *Graphic Organizer* was beneficial to over 70% of participants' retention of reading content.

Remembering the preferences of millennial students for team or collaborative learning, the researchers found that when presented with portions of the reading content, participants perceived a benefit to their individual learning. With regard to the *Prompt Questions* strategy, over 80% found the intervention helpful to their own learning. The *Carousel* strategy produced a 70% reported benefit; *Jig Saw* benefited 86%, and those who used the *Graphic Organizer* at 95%. Preferences for a particular reading intervention approach strategy were provided through participants' self-reports (Table 6).

**Table 6*****Reading Intervention Strategy Preferences as Ranks in Self-Report***

<b>Intervention Strategy</b>	<b>Preferential Ranking</b>
<i>Graphic Organizer</i>	1
<i>Jig Saw</i>	2
<i>Prompt Questions</i>	3
<i>Carrousel</i>	4
<i>Ticket-Out-Of-Class (Quiz)</i>	5

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Even though participants indicated the *Graphic Organizer* as their top preference for repeated use, research results did not find the method to be the most effective reading strategy for the university student. For instance, the *Graphic Organizer* is a device that is frequently implemented in middle and high school settings; therefore, this strategy may have been more familiar among participants, thus it was rated higher in preference. On the other hand, results for conveying content show that the *Jig Saw* and the *Carrousel* reading intervention strategies were most effective; however, *Prompt Questions* trailed only slightly in effectiveness.

Paul, Peek, and Luecker (1995) state that, to engage in reading, students must initially be motivated to learn. Also, teachers play a pivotal role in motivating students in several ways, which include communicating high expectations and helping students set and attain goals. More importantly, teachers should provide students with multiple types of reinforcement to maintain active engagement in learning. However, as Ford (1985) states, there are factors that interact with an individual's social and personal competence, which translates to self-management and responsibility. Generally speaking, motivation impacts whether or not an individual, with or without skills, is willing to engage in goal setting, problem-solving, role-taking, communication, etc.

Ultimately, when reading is involved teachers will need to encourage student motivation and engagement. Teachers should model and convey in their students a sense of routine, structure, and foundation while remembering that optimal learning is best activated through specific and effective interventions designed to enhance knowledge and achievement. In addition, teachers must also challenge, motivate, guide, and support students throughout the reading and learning process so instruction can be adjusted and independence gained. University students for example, should be guided to develop confidence, set goals, and develop a sense of ownership for their own learning. Ideally, activities and assignments are meaningful and connected to real life events and examples. Reading tasks are designed purposefully to engage readers to stay on task, with instructors allowing frequent opportunities to respond, avoiding a heavy emphasis on grading, and providing learning tactics that support success (Lenz, Deshler, & Kissam, 2004; Woolfolk, 2001).

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study had several limitations that need to be addressed such as its focus on undergraduate university students from one geographical setting who had similar degree goals. Future studies should be directed to include a greater diversity of learners, such as graduate students and those of different races and backgrounds. Furthermore, to be a true experimental design, the study could have encompassed a control group. This might allow a better comparison relating to data results. Precise interventions need additional uniformity applied across settings by researchers to ensure standardized data collection. For example, given the breadth of data collected, an improved strategic approach might enhance the routine processes involved in the study.



## CONCLUSION

As described by Monaco and Martin (2007), the millennial learner is a student who is reluctant to prepare for class and must acquire information in a variety of delivery formats other than ones typically attributed to traditional forms of teaching (i.e. lecture). The motivation involved in reading and participating with content among university students is typically lower and less productive when compared to previous generations of students (Strauss & Howe, 2003). Therefore, the researchers of this study applied reading interventions known to improve the likelihood of reading involvement typical of secondary school settings to university classrooms to determine whether or not reading motivation and engagement with the text was improved. Interventions such as *Jig Saw*, *Carousel*, *Prompt Questions*, *Graphic Organizers*, and *Ticket-Out-Of-Class (Quiz)* increased overall reading involvement and participation (i.e. reading text and acquiring/applying learning concepts) among participants completing the survey.

Though several reading intervention strategies were identified by participants in preferential order, the most effective approaches in the university classroom setting were *Jig Saw* and *Carousel*. This study found that, with the appropriate reading intervention strategies and approaches, millennial students who were more highly engaged in reading experienced a greater degree of motivation to complete readings tasks with groups, or as individuals, and were more actively involved in participation reading tasks and activities.

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