Review of Research on the Role of Interest Level in Students’ Reading Materials

How *Hot Topics: High-Interest Reading* Supports Comprehension and Learning

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Introduction

If a topic evokes interest, one is likely to have a positive feeling about that topic, continue to have interest in it, and as a result learn (more) about it. This common-sense assertion is supported by a substantial body of research on the role of interest in facilitating learning among young children. Research provides insights into many different aspects of interest: the factors that promote the development of interest, the attributes of interesting materials, and the influence of interest on learning.

High-interest reading materials designed to motivate and facilitate learning, particularly among struggling and unmotivated readers, are abundantly available for classroom instruction as textbooks or as materials to supplement a school’s curriculum. One such product that was specifically designed for upper-elementary and middle-school children is Hot Topics: High-Interest Reading, published by Evan-Moor Educational Publishers. The purpose of this paper is to review relevant research studies that support the view that high-interest materials taught in the manner prescribed by Hot Topics will have a positive effect on student learning.

Although many empirical studies showing the positive impacts of interest on learning have been carried out with college students and preschool children, it is appropriate in this paper to emphasize (1) the research conducted on children as close as possible to the age group and grade levels (grades 4 to 8) to which Hot Topics is targeted and (2) the studies and writings that are most applicable to the classroom teaching setting.

This paper is presented in five parts. The first part briefly describes Hot Topics: the types of reading materials it contains, its instructional approach, and special features of the product. It then discusses the concept of “interest” and documents key studies that demonstrate the effects of high-interest reading materials on learning. The third part summarizes studies on a special type of interest, known as situational interest, while highlighting key text features of Hot Topics that are known to be effective in facilitating learning. The fourth part presents research that supports the teaching approach prescribed by Hot Topics. The paper concludes with an overall assessment of Hot Topics as a potentially effective instructional product.

Hot Topics: High-Interest Reading

Hot Topics is a supplemental “high-lo” (high interest, low readability) reading product for struggling readers in grades 4–8. It is designed to help struggling readers “become active readers through direct instruction of strategies and the use of engaging motivational texts” (Hot Topics Teacher’s Guide). These strategies include: comparing and contrasting, distinguishing fact from opinion, drawing conclusions, and identifying cause and effect, among others. Hot Topics presents a variety of reading selections in both fiction and nonfiction genres, including informational articles, biographies, folktales, realistic fiction, how-to’s, and interviews. The product also provides Lexile® scores and reading levels based on Fountas and Pinnell criteria for every selection to assist
teachers in choosing the selections that are most appropriate for the reading abilities of their students.

The Concept of Interest

There is compelling evidence that interest is related to learning. Hidi (1990) argues that “interest is central in determining how we select and persist in processing certain kinds of information in preference to others” (p. 549). The assumption is that individuals are more likely to attend to and learn from interesting materials as opposed to uninteresting materials. This assumption has received substantial support from studies carried out over a period of more than 20 years.

Researchers have distinguished two types of interest that reflect distinct areas of research focus: individual interest and situational interest. According to Hidi (2001) individual interest “develops slowly, tends to be long lasting, and is associated with increased knowledge and value” (p. 103). Wade et al. (1999) associate individual interest with “personal significance, positive emotions, high value, and increased knowledge” (p. 197). It has also been equated with “intrinsic” motivation. Many studies cited by Hidi & Baird (1988) have shown that cognitive performance as measured by many different indicators improved with personal interest. Typical indicators of interest are increased attention, greater concentration, pleasant feelings, and increased willingness to learn (Krapp et al., 1992).

Situational interest, on the other hand, is “evoked by something in the immediate environment, and consequently may or may not have a long-term effect on individual’s knowledge and value” (Hidi, 2001, p. 193). It focuses on the environment and contextual factors. In the case of reading, these include “characteristics of the text, inducements, and social activities surrounding the reading event” (Wade et al., 1999, p. 197). Situational interest has been associated with “extrinsic” motivation and has been called “externally triggered motivation” (Hidi, 2001, p. 203). A specific class of situational interest research that focuses on text material is known as “text-based interest” (Hidi and Baird, 1988).

Personal and situational interest are not mutually exclusive. Both involve “increased attention and cognitive functioning, persistence, and have an affective component” (Hidi, 2001, p. 193). One can be influenced by the other—a child with a well-developed interest, for example, may react differently to a situation than someone without such interest, and a situation may contribute to the development of long-lasting personal interest. Hidi and Harackiewicz (2000) argue that situational interest can lead to “continued and persistent activity that becomes self-initiated … self-determined and autonomous” (p. 156) and that “creating environments that stimulate interest is one way for schools to motivate students and help them make cognitive gains in areas that initially hold little interest for them” (p. 156). Hidi (2001) has been an outspoken proponent of utilizing situational interest in motivating children in academic activities as opposed to utilizing individual interest largely because it tends to be impractical for teachers to develop individualized programs that match students’ personal interest to the school curriculum. Hidi and Harackiewicz (2000) assert that “… situationally interesting activities may be one of the most realistic approaches to educational intervention” (p. 159).

Research has clearly demonstrated that interest has a powerful facilitative effect on cognitive functioning (Hidi and Harackiewicz, 2000) whether the type of interest under study is individual or situational. In a later review, Hidi (2001) concluded that research findings “indicate
that all types of interest tend to facilitate reader’s comprehension and recall” (p. 195). However, the type of interest that is more applicable to the realities of classroom teaching is situational interest. What follows is a brief summary of studies and writings on situational interest, with a focus on the factors that contribute to text-based interest and its influence on reading performance and related outcomes.

**Hot Topics and Research on Situational Interest**

Most of the research on the influence of situational interest generally involves the following steps. First, text material is rated for interestingness. Second, subjects read the material. And third, the relationship between the rated text and performance on some task is determined. Research on text-based interest focuses on the features that make text more or less interesting and how these features influence comprehension and attention.

Studies (ERS Supporting Good Teaching Series, 2004; Hidi, 1990; Hidi and Anderson, 1992; Hidi and Baird, 1988; Hidi and Harackiewicz, 2000; Krapp et al., 1992; Rog and Kropp, ND; Wade, 1992; Wade et al., 1999) have reported a large number of characteristics that contribute to interest in text-based materials and to positive learning outcomes (e.g., text recall, comprehension, attention). These characteristics include:

- character identification;
- ease of comprehension;
- importance/value (ascribing personal significance, worth, or salience to a topic);
- unexpectedness (topics that have elements of surprise, unusualness, or abnormality);
- writing style (e.g., using active rather than passive constructions);
- high imagery value (e.g., less abstract writing; vivid, personalized, dramatic details and anecdotes);
- life themes;
- plenty of illustrations;
- intensity of action or high activity level;
- prior knowledge (the connection between what students know about a topic and their interest in it);
- story elements with goal-directed activities and human interest factors;
- simple descriptions of such activities (e.g., how to do the activity);
- graphic aids (e.g., charts, maps, lists, quantified information); and
- measured readability levels.

*Hot Topics* contains a large variety of reading selections. Many of these selections contain text features that are associated with high-interest reading and, therefore, would likely produce the kinds of positive reading outcomes consistent with those found in the interest research listed above. For example, *Hot Topics* includes:

- biographies of important people;
- use of vivid imagery and words;
- stories with surprise elements or unexpected endings;
- human interest stories;
- stories of social value and significance;
- stories with dramatic details;
- stories involving high-activity pursuits;
- stories about life experiences/people that children can identify with;
- stories presented with many colorful illustrations; and
- stories of different readability levels to ensure ease of comprehension.
**Hot Topics Teaching Method and Supporting Research**

Each *Hot Topics* unit in the Teacher’s Guide is divided into three instructional parts: “Before You Read,” “While You Read,” and “After You Read.” This sequence of activities is generally considered helpful in fostering students’ understanding of what they read (ERS, 2000). The “Before You Read” activity “prepares students to read by connecting them with the topic, providing needed background, introducing new words and concepts, and setting a purpose for reading” (*Hot Topics* Teacher’s Guide). Studies suggest that “reading for a particular purpose can enhance text-based interest” (Hidi and Harackiewicz, 2000, p. 154). Connecting students with the topic by tapping into their prior knowledge was also found in the interest research to be one of the factors that evokes interest. To create this connection, *Hot Topics* suggests a variety of approaches to present the reading selections, including allowing students to choose the selections that appeal to their individual interests.

Readers are then guided through the reading process in “While You Read.” For each selection, a specific focus strategy (e.g., visualizing, comparing, making inferences) is presented and modeled. A study cited by Hidi and Harackiewicz (2000) suggests that the key to maintaining interest after it has been triggered is to empower students by helping them to attach “meaning or personal relevance” (p. 155) to their reading. The focus strategy, therefore, is designed to keep readers engaged with the topic while locating and connecting personally to information in the text. Also, a graphic organizer is provided for writing or drawing personal responses while reading.

The “After You Read” activities then give readers an opportunity to think about what they have read and to share their personal responses in a variety of ways, including writing, drawing, dramatization, or listening and speaking. Consequently, as readers share their unique responses, they again exchange knowledge and reinforce each other’s interest in the topic.

*HotTopics* is particularly suitable for struggling readers because the reading selections are leveled according to the widely used Lexile Framework® and readability measures based on Fountas and Pinnell criteria, thereby giving teachers control over the selections that are most appropriate for an individual child’s reading ability or the reading level of the whole group.

**Conclusion**

Does *Hot Topics* possess “interestingness,” and does it prescribe an instructional approach that would motivate students and facilitate actual learning according to the findings of research? Based on a review of the product, it appears that *Hot Topics* has been explicitly designed to motivate students, using high-interest text and effective teaching methods that are also supported by solid research.

In summary, *Hot-Topics: High-Interest Reading* does possess many characteristics of high-interest reading materials and employs an instructional approach that research suggests would motivate students, maintain their attention on the learning tasks at hand, and potentially reinforce individual interests that children bring with them to the classroom.
Bibliography


