

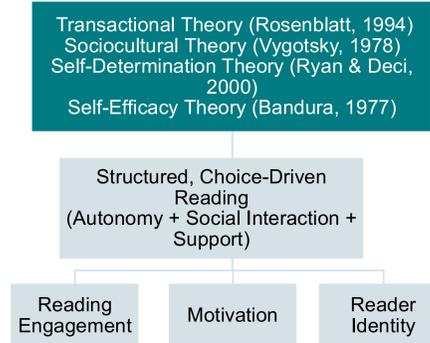
# Structured, Choice-Driven Independent Reading: Improving Engagement Among Reluctant Readers in Secondary English Classrooms

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## Theoretical Framework

This research is guided by an **interpretivist paradigm**, which views learning as constructed through students' experiences and perspectives.

- **Transactional Theory of Reading** – Meaning emerges through the interaction between reader and text (Rosenblatt, 1994).
  - **Sociocultural Theory** – Learning is socially mediated through dialogue, collaboration, and cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978).
  - **Self-Determination Theory** – Motivation increases when students experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2020).
  - **Self-Efficacy Theory** – Students persist when they believe they are capable of success (Bandura, 1977).
- Together, these frameworks suggest that reading engagement increases when students experience structured autonomy supported through social interaction and meaningful learning experiences.



## Research Topic and Question

**Research Topic:** Student disengagement from reading in secondary English language arts classrooms.

**Research Question:** How do structured, choice-driven independent reading approaches affect engagement and motivation among reluctant readers in Canadian secondary English classrooms?

### Significance:

- Many adolescents experience declining motivation to read independently (Bendel, 2024; Mullinnix, 2023).
- Traditional reading instruction often emphasizes compliance rather than engagement (Holmes, 2023).
- Access to self-selected texts supports reader identity development and long-term literacy growth (O'Grady, 2025; Vogel & Davis, 2025).

**The Context:** This study is situated in secondary English classrooms, drawing on Canadian and international research, and explores how structured, choice-driven independent reading supports engagement, motivation, and the development of self-efficacy and reader identity among reluctant adolescent readers.

**Thesis Statement:** This review argues that structured, choice-driven independent reading positively impacts reluctant readers' engagement and motivation in Canadian secondary English classrooms. It does so by supporting autonomy, improving attitudes toward reading, strengthening self-efficacy, and fostering inclusive, socially supported learning environments shaped by intentional teacher instruction and feedback.



"Engagement depends on whether students see themselves as 'the kind of person who reads'" (O'Grady, 2025, p. 4)



## Literature Review

Five key themes emerged across the literature that help explain how structured, choice-driven independent reading influences engagement and motivation among secondary students.

### Student Autonomy

- Providing students with meaningful choice in what they read increases engagement, motivation, and ownership of learning by making reading more relevant and personally meaningful (Burwell, 2025; Honeycutt, 2025; Mullinnix, 2023; O'Grady, 2025).
- Student autonomy encourages deeper reading experiences, as Rosenblatt's transactional theory suggests readers engage more meaningfully when they adopt an aesthetic stance that connects texts to personal experiences (Rosenblatt, 1994; O'Grady, 2025).
- Autonomy also supports intrinsic motivation, as self-determination theory identifies student choice, self-regulation, and reflective dialogue as key factors that sustain engagement with literacy practices (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2020; Holmes, 2023).

### Reading Engagement and Attitudes Toward Reading

- Classroom conditions significantly shape reading engagement, with research showing that adolescent disengagement often results from instructional and structural barriers rather than a lack of interest in reading (Bendel, 2024; Inada, 2023; Jeyaraja, 2025; Mullinnix, 2023; O'Grady, 2025).
- Student choice increases engagement and intrinsic motivation when students can select texts that align with their interests (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Honeycutt, 2025; Burwell, 2025).
- Student-centered approaches that emphasize autonomy and collaboration strengthen attitudes toward reading, although factors such as limited time, resources, and teacher preparation can constrain implementation (Fufa et al., 2023; Inada, 2023).

### Self-Efficacy and Reader Identity Development

- Self-efficacy, defined as "the student's belief that they can succeed in a given task" (Bendel, 2024, p. 11), strongly influences whether adolescents persist with reading or disengage, particularly when repeated difficulty leads them to view themselves as "non-readers" (Bandura, 1977; Bendel; Cissi et al., 2024).
- Positive reading experiences and student choice strengthen students' identities as readers, as opportunities to select accessible and personally meaningful texts increase confidence, motivation, and willingness to engage with reading (Bendel, 2024; Baba & Affendi, 2020; Mullinnix, 2023).
- Supportive and socially engaging reading environments strengthen self-efficacy, helping students see themselves as capable readers and sustain long-term motivation (Cissi et al., 2024; Mullinnix, 2023).

### Socially Supported and Inclusive Reading Environments

- Engagement improves when students have access to inclusive and culturally relevant texts (Florence, 2017; Holmes, 2023) and when literacy is positioned as a social practice, as peer discussions, collaborative reading, and shared dialogue support meaning-making and motivation (Vygotsky, 1978; Honeycutt, 2025; O'Grady, 2025; Vogel & Davis, 2025).
- Librarians and teachers play a critical role as well-resourced classroom libraries that reflect students' identities, interests, and reading levels help reduce barriers and foster belonging (Florence, 2017; Holmes, 2023; O'Grady, 2025)
- Collaborative reading communities strengthen motivation and participation, as peer recommendations, book talks, and informal reading conversations normalize reading as a shared and valued activity (Baba & Affendi, 2020; Cissi et al., 2024; Honeycutt, 2025; Inada, 2023).

### Intentional Teacher Instruction and Feedback

- Structured, choice-driven independent reading is most effective when teachers actively scaffold the process through modeling, differentiated instruction, clear expectations, and ongoing formative feedback (Burwell, 2025; Sapan & Mede, 2022; Holmes, 2023; Kim et al., 2025).
- Independent reading is most effective when paired with teacher guidance, reflective feedback and conferencing (Holmes, 2023; Sapan & Mede, 2022) helping students persist with texts and view reading as a meaningful academic practice rather than unstructured free time (Bendel, 2024; Mullinnix, 2023; Cissi et al., 2024; O'Grady, 2025).

## Recommendations

### 1 Structured Independent Reading Blocks

- Implement 15–20 minutes of protected independent reading several times per week.
- Pair reading with brief teacher–student conferences focused on reflection and goal setting (Holmes, 2023; Mullinnix, 2023).

### 2 Diverse Classroom Libraries

- Invest in inclusive classroom libraries representing diverse cultures, genres, and reading levels (Florence, 2017; Honeycutt, 2025).

### 3 Collaborative Reading Communities

- Incorporate book talks, peer recommendations, and small-group discussions (Cissi et al., 2024; Inada, 2023).

### 4 Reflective Assessment Practices

- Use reading journals, portfolios, and reflective responses to support autonomy and self-efficacy (Bendel, 2024; Mullinnix, 2023).



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## Barriers and Feasibility

- **Time and curriculum constraints limit flexibility**, though integrating independent reading can improve comprehension and persistence (Fufa et al., 2023; Bendel, 2024; Mullinnix, 2023).
- **Financial inequities restrict access to diverse texts**, requiring funding and partnerships to support classroom libraries (Florence, 2017).
- **Cultural resistance may hinder adoption**, highlighting the need to communicate research-based benefits for motivation and self-efficacy (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Bandura, 1977).
- **Teacher preparedness is essential**, with training in conferencing and differentiation supporting effective implementation (Holmes, 2023; Inada, 2023).

## Conclusion

Structured, choice-driven independent reading can significantly improve engagement and motivation among reluctant secondary readers.

Autonomy is most effective when paired with:

- Instructional guidance
- Equitable access to diverse texts
- Opportunities for social interaction

When implemented intentionally, independent reading becomes an identity-building literacy practice rather than a compliance-driven task (Holmes, 2023; O'Grady, 2025; Vogel & Davis, 2025).

### References

