What motivates English learners to read in English? This article offers ideas on how teachers might address the reading motivation of ELs in their classrooms.

If you get a book that you really, really like and you wished you could read it again…and if you’re in a bad mood and you read it, it kind of calms you down and makes you think about the book.

These are the words of Nabila (all names are pseudonyms), a 12-year-old girl born in Afghanistan who has been in the United States for four years. Nabila first arrived in the United States when she was in second grade, speaking very little English and unable to read. Now a sixth grader, Nabila is a voracious reader, choosing to read over any other activity. As the preceding quote indicates, Nabila is passionate about reading. The challenge for teachers is to encourage more students like Nabila, who have just come from another country and are navigating a new academic environment and language, to become passionate and motivated readers.

Teachers now find more immigrant students in their classrooms as the number of English learners (ELs) has risen dramatically in the past decade. Researchers have pointed out that much needs to be done to teach these students to learn content and concurrently learn English (e.g., Goldenberg, 2008). Cummins (2011) suggested that we should consider literacy engagement (which includes reading motivation) to be a “primary determinant of literacy achievement” (p. 142) for ELs. In other words, we should strongly consider affective factors, such as motivation and engagement, as we contemplate how to help ELs become better English readers.

We already have a substantial amount of knowledge about students’ reading motivation from research conducted these past few decades. First, we know that reading motivation is linked to reading achievement (e.g., Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Next, we know that students who have high levels of reading motivation read more extensively compared with students with lower levels of motivation (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997) and also use higher order comprehension skills (e.g., Taboada, Tonks, Wigfield, & Guthrie, 2009).

These findings also make sense intuitively. If students are motivated to read, they read more. When they read more, they are more likely to improve their reading abilities, specifically their comprehension. Thus reading turns into a conduit for learning. As Gambrell (2011) pointed out, it is crucial to focus on motivation to support students to become “proficient, persistent, and passionate readers” (p. 177). We know that motivation is important, and it is what makes the difference between “learning that is superficial and shallow and learning that is deep and internalized” (Gambrell, 1996, p. 15).

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There is a wealth of information for teachers on how to motivate mainstream students based on numerous studies. Researchers have identified factors that motivate students to read, such as self-efficacy beliefs about reading, access to interesting texts, social interactions around books, autonomy support, or opportunities for self-selection (Gambrell, 2011; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). However, we do not know whether these factors are the same ones that motivate ELs to read books in English or whether we need to consider additional motivational factors.

Both motivation and EL pedagogy are key areas that need to be given more attention (Cooter & Perkins, 2011). It is my hope that this article will provide an insightful integration of these two topics to provide classroom teachers with ideas on how to increase reading motivation among ELs in their classroom.

The Study
This article highlights the results of my interview study, which focused on the question “What motivates upper elementary ELs to read in English?” I focused on six ELs (four boys and two girls) who represent multiple ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Although all six focal students had formal schooling experiences in their native countries, only one came to the United States having some knowledge of English; others had to learn English upon their entry into U.S. schools.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with focal students. In initial interviews, I asked students about their experiences in adjusting to living and studying in the United States. I then asked about their reading habits and reasons they wanted to read in English. In the second round of interviews, I followed up on key ideas students raised during the initial interviews. I wanted to ensure that focal students had multiple opportunities to respond to some of the same questions so they could provide all possible information on the topic (Spradley, 1979). Five of the six focal students were interviewed twice; one student was absent during the second round of interviews and was thus only interviewed once. I coded the interview transcripts using a priori codes based on previous research on this topic.

The focal students also completed a reading log wherein they had to take note of the reading they did over a three-day period (from Friday to Sunday). Students recorded all types of reading, and they supplied a brief statement of why they liked or did not like what they read.

Pause and Ponder

- Based on the results of this interview study, there are many reasons why English learners (ELs) are motivated to read in English: How are you fostering a classroom environment where ELs can develop or maintain their reading motivation?
- Focal students said that reading became a way for them to bond with their peers in the United States and learn more about their new culture. How can you apply this to motivate ELs in your classroom?

“I focused on six ELs (four boys and two girls) who represent multiple ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Although all six focal students had formal schooling experiences in their native countries, only one came to the United States having some knowledge of English; others had to learn English upon their entry into U.S. schools.”

A more detailed description of the research design, participants, data collection methods, and data analysis can be read in the Research Supplement of the online version of this article.

What We Know About ELs’ Reading Motivation
There is a scarcity of research focused on ELs’ reading motivation in the United States. Because reading motivation has been found to be related to reading achievement, this is an area on which we need to focus, especially with ELs (Cummins, 2011). Because of the lack of research on this topic in the United States, the following brief literature review is based both on research conducted in the United States and in settings where English is a foreign language.

One point that is important to consider regarding ELs’ reading motivation is that it is layered with their motivation for learning the second language (Taboada & McElvany, 2009). Thus we should consider the roles of instrumental motivation and integrative motivation in motivating ELs to read in English because these have been found to motivate individuals to learn a new language.

Instrumental motivation centers on utilitarian value or affordances of a task (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). For instance, instrumentally motivated students may want to read their textbooks because they realize this will likely help them obtain a good grade on...
an exam. As an example of instrumental orientation, students in Singapore recognized that reading in English was important because of its relationship to academic achievement (Bokhorst-Heng & Pereira, 2008).

Meanwhile, integrative motivation has to do with learning about a new culture and the people in that culture (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Individuals who are integratively motivated want to learn a language or read in another language so they can be identified with the native speakers of that language or learn about another culture. In other words, an immigrant student in the United States who has integrative motivation might want to learn how to speak and read in English to affiliate with Americans or to learn more about U.S. culture.

We must also consider ELs’ “interaction with and within the larger sociocultural context” (Rueda, MacGillivray, Monzo, & Arzubiaga, 2001, p. 4) in relation to their reading motivation. In other words, ELs’ classroom and home environments may influence their motivation to read in English. Motivating environments are ones wherein reading is valued and encouraged. Aside from the actual physical classroom environment, the concept of the sociocultural environment also factors in the influence of family and friends on students’ reading motivation. For example, Rueda et al. (2001) found that Latino students whose families actively pursued literacy activities in Spanish and English tend to value reading more than those whose families did not.

Another factor that may play a role in motivating ELs to read in English is their perceived competence. Research has found conflicting results about the role of perceived competence on the reading motivation of ELs. Some studies have found that students with higher levels of English proficiency tend to have higher levels of reading motivation as compared with students with lower levels of proficiency (e.g., Butler, 2007). In contrast, others have reported no difference between the reading attitudes of students who were proficient in English and those who were not (Yamashita, 2004).

Lastly, Day and Bamford (1998) identified reading materials as one of the variables influencing individuals to read in a second language. Providing interesting texts to ELs is critical in motivating them to read in English. Students need to be exposed to interesting and appealing texts from various genres that are appropriate for their reading level (e.g., Chun, 2009), and this might contribute to their motivation to read English texts.

In sum, this section indicates that multiple factors are at play in motivating ELs to read in English. The purpose of this article is to shed light and provide additional evidence on the varying factors that contribute to ELs’ motivation to read in English.

Findings
Results of this study suggest there are several motivational factors that both educators and literacy researchers should consider in relation to ELs’ reading motivation. Based on the qualitative data, there seemed to be five overarching reasons for ELs’ reading motivation.

1. Sociocultural environment—ELs are motivated to read because of family members and friends in their immediate environment.

The social aspect of reading seemed to play a prominent role in the motivation of ELs. The importance of family in promoting reading was very apparent through interviews. Three focal students cited at least one of their parents as being a reading role model.
For example, Marcus, a fifth grader originally from Iraq, said his father reads Arabic texts every night after he comes home from work. Marcus shared that he wanted to be like his dad and be able to read in his native language. Meanwhile, Farid, a Lebanese fifth grader, boasted about his mother’s reading abilities, stating that she was able to complete a thick book every two days. Saya’s mother is even more involved with her daughter’s reading because she reads the same books as Saya so they can engage in conversations about the text.

Jonathan’s parents, on the other hand, take a different approach. Jonathan, a Chinese fifth grader, does not mention his parents reading, but he shared that his parents required him to read for at least 30 minutes a day. Jonathan admitted that in the beginning he hated to read, but during his required reading he realized that he was actually interested in the books he was reading. These examples show that parental influence on reading can take on many forms, and each way worked in getting focal students more motivated to read in English.

The influence of friends was also prominent. When I asked Jonathan what he and his friends talked about when it came to reading, he responded:

Well, we talk about how the book end[s]. And then when we’re reading one book and some parts if they don’t get it, we will tell them what it actually means or we can tell him what comes up next. Especially when we talked about [Rick Riordan’s] The Last Olympian, I’m like “Have you got to the battle part yet?” and she’s like, “No.” And sometimes someone asks me, and I’ll tell a little but I want you to read the whole thing. Like sometimes at the end, it’s like, “Oh, the battle is so cool.” It’s like, “Oh did you see, the Titans, they come up and how they defeated the Greek fighter.” And “I can’t believe the fights at the end.” It just makes us want to talk more and talk more. Like sometimes if we don’t understand but the other person understands, so then you’ll understand more about the books, then you’ll learn more.

His enthusiastic response indicated that he and his friends seemed to be more motivated to read because of their discussions around the book. More importantly, they also helped each other in understanding the texts. These students knew that conversations around books could help their comprehension.

Marcus was also more motivated to read because of social interactions since he and his friends developed a competition among them about reading. Marcus and his friends would decide on Friday what book they wanted to read, and they each borrowed a copy from the library. They read the book over the weekend, and when they got back to school on Monday, they would quiz each other about what they read. Their goal was to be better than each other in comprehending the book, and this is what motivated them to read.

Nabila, meanwhile, said she likes to discuss books with her friends, such as Karina, another EL. When I asked her about the kinds of interactions she and Karina had about books, Nabila said, “After we read the books and we went to our lockers, we’d be like ‘Hey, I like that part’ or ‘Oh my God, I wonder what’s going to happen next.’ I make predictions on what’s going to happen next.” However, Nabila said she doesn’t limit herself to who she talks to about books:

Well, I can talk about reading with anyone because if they’re reading the same book then I can just go over to them and if we have recess and we’re walking together, I can just say “Hey, what part did you like in [Scott O’Dell’s] Island of the Blue Dolphins?”

These examples show how interactions with friends promoted a motivating environment for reading for some focal students. Overall, the sociocultural environment, composed of family and friends, seemed to be an influential factor in motivating these ELs to read in English.

2. Integrative orientation—ELs use reading as a way to form bonds with their American peers and learn more about their new culture.
In the previous section about sociocultural environment, I discussed how the influence of friends played an important role in motivating the focal students to read English books. Something that is worth noting is the fact that focal students who were motivated to read for social reasons engaged in interactions with their American peers, except for Nabila, who interacted with another EL (but who was from a different country).

None of the focal students indicated that they interacted with students from their own country about books. Marcus explained that he did not talk to his Chaldean friends about reading because they were not yet competent readers; they were still developing their English literacy skills. Marcus also credited his American friend, Kyle (the one with whom he engages in competitions), as one of the people who has made him a better reader. When Marcus was learning how to speak and read in English, Kyle constantly helped him out.

Jonathan also only engaged in interactions with his American friends, but it is for a very different reason than Marcus. He recalled the response of his Chinese friends when he attempted to tell them about something humorous that he read in English:

I talk a little bit to them about it, but I learn very fast English. So then when I talk to them, it looks like they learn pretty slow so they just don’t understand what I’m saying, so I switched it to Chinese. They still don’t get the humor of what it is. Sometimes there’s different jokes and sometimes it’s not funny in another [language] so it’s hard to talk about it. And when I talk to them about it, it’s like [they said] “You are pretty weird, and we really don’t understand what you’re talking about.” “Oh, OK. Well, I’m talking to other people then. If you don’t understand then other people understand.”

From this interview excerpt, Jonathan seemed somewhat frustrated that his eagerness to share something from a book was rejected by his Chinese friends. In addition, Jonathan mentioned another reason he does not like talking to his Chinese friends about what he reads in English is that they accuse him of becoming “too American.”

Contrary to Marcus and Jonathan’s experiences, Saya was not motivated to read for social reasons in the United States. When she was in Japan, it was actually her friends who got her involved with reading. She noticed they were always reading, and so she decided to start reading too and became a very motivated reader of Japanese texts. Saya said that when she got to the United States, her American friends did not like to read; thus reading became more of an isolating experience for her in the United States, a stark contrast to her experience as a reader in Japan.

Saya’s example illustrates how the integrative motivation may also have a negative effect on reading motivation depending on who in the target group the students affiliate themselves with. Unlike Jonathan and Marcus’ friendships with their American peers, which contributed to increasing their reading motivation, Saya’s friendship with American students instead decreased her interest in reading English books.

In relation to integrative motivation, ELs can be motivated to read in English because they can learn about their new culture through reading. For example, through books, ELs can learn about the holidays celebrated in the United States. They can also learn about items that most Americans assume everyone recognizes. For example, Nabila mentioned that it was a book that she learned what a hot dog was:

There was this book about hot dogs. And I have never eaten hot dogs before I came over here. First I was like, what is this? And when I read this book and it showed this guy who paid a penny or something to get a hot dog and he was eating it, how it’s eaten and stuff. After I read the book, and I went to lunch, I saw some people eating [a hot dog] the same way, I was like, “Hey, that’s right. That’s how they eat it.”

Nabila’s example illustrates how reading can be a way for ELs to learn more about their new environment and allow themselves to be more familiar with American culture.

This section illustrates that there are many facets that need to be considered, such as who the students interact with about reading as well as the ways in which ELs can be motivated to read to learn about the new culture in which they are immersed.

3. Instrumental motivation—ELs are motivated to read because they realize the value of reading in further developing their competence in English.

A number of the focal students articulated the importance of reading in English. Nabila eloquently said that when she is able to choose a book, she is able to “shop for her mind”: 

“Reading can be a way for ELs to learn more about their new environment and allow themselves to be more familiar with American culture.”
When you can pick your own book, you kind of are shopping for your mind. If you read different kinds of books, like history and stuff, you kind of shop in your mind and it gets all in your brain, and you learn about it.

Nabila’s quote indicates that she is motivated to read in English because she wants to learn. She understood that she is acquiring information through reading.

Jonathan, meanwhile, realized the connection between reading in English and acquiring new vocabulary. He said, “If I only read English book(s) it will increase my English vocabulary. If I increase my English vocabulary, I will increase interest in English books.” Jonathan understood that reading in English was a way for him to continue to increase his English vocabulary.

Tahir, a sixth grader originally from Pakistan, also seemed to allude to the idea that reading in English was connected to an improvement in English-speaking abilities. He noted that through reading, his skills in English have improved, and he has a wider vocabulary.

Jonathan and Nabila also noted that reading can help with their writing skills. Jonathan mentioned that through reading he becomes more aware of the different writing styles in English compared with the writing styles of Chinese authors. Meanwhile, Nabila shared that she is able to improve her writing through reading. By reading different texts, she is able to get ideas about how to make her writing more interesting.

These examples illustrate that focal students realized the value of reading in English, and this motivated them to read more in English. The focal students seemed to be cognizant of the effects of reading in helping them become more proficient in English.

4. Perceived competence—ELs’ perception of their English abilities are related to their motivation to read in English.

Results of this study support previous findings (e.g., Butler, 2007) that ELs’ perceived competence to read in English influences their reading motivation. Some of the focal students, such as Marcus, Jonathan, and Farid, had high levels of perceived competence. For example, Marcus described himself as a motivated reader and indicated that he likes to read thick, challenging books. Marcus indicated that he was confident about his reading abilities and would be able to comprehend texts that he encountered.

Jonathan, meanwhile, said he could not only understand books that he read, but he could also make connections among other texts he had read. “I can just think about it and I can imagine about it, and I can think that book how good is it and how like other books compared to that one. What’s the difference? What’s similar?” From this statement, we can infer that Jonathan is an active and proficient reader who employs comprehension strategies such as visualization and making connections.

Farid, who has been in the United States for four years, also seemed to have high perceived competence. Farid came to the United States not knowing English, although he could speak both Arabic and Hebrew. Farid recalled that he was quite intimidated when he first saw the English language, but he indicated that he now comprehends the English texts he reads.

However, there were two focal students, Saya and Tahir, who had lower levels of perceived competence, which influenced their motivation to read in English. Saya used to be a very motivated reader in Japan. When she got to the United States, she wanted to read in English because she liked reading in Japanese. However, it was hard for her because she didn’t know any English. Saya indicated, “I [still] like to read Japanese better because sometimes there are still words that I don’t understand in English.” Saya’s low perceived competence hindered her from reading more in English. Instead, she resorted to reading Japanese books because this is something she knows she can read competently.

Perceived competence is a dynamic variable that will likely change for ELs as they continue to develop and improve their English literacy skills.
Such was the case of Farid, who initially was intimidated to read in English, and he became more motivated as his proficiency increased. These examples illustrate the importance of students’ perceived competence in reading English texts. ELs need to feel competent in reading English texts so they may be more likely to become motivated readers.

5. Reading materials—ELs are motivated to read interesting books that are at their independent reading level.

Interesting texts—All of the focal students were able to articulate the reading materials they did and did not want to read. Saya said she likes to read fiction, fantasy, and mystery books because they are exciting to read, whereas she does not like to read nonfiction books because she finds them boring. Tahir said he likes reading magazines such as *Time for Kids* because he appreciates the real stories that are featured. He also mentioned his fondness for books about animals: “In silent reading, I like to read animals books. In Pakistan we have the channel National Geographic. I like that channel so I like to read those [animal] books.” To motivate ELs to read more in English, we must try to meet their interests both in terms of topics and genres.

Matching texts to readers’ abilities—Day and Bamford (1998) highlighted the importance of matching reading materials to readers’ linguistic level. Results of this study confirm this assertion. For instance, Tahir said he did not like reading books that had “hard” words in it. During our first interview, Tahir did not seem to be a motivated reader. He struggled with comprehending texts, and this may have affected his level of motivation.

One day, I was in the English as a Second Language (ESL) resource room and heard Ms. Matthews, his ESL teacher, asking Tahir about the book his class was currently reading in language arts. Tahir just shrugged in response and seemed indifferent about the book. After some probing by Ms. Matthews, she found out that Tahir was not comprehending the book because the words in it were too difficult.

She talked to Tahir’s language arts teacher to make arrangements for him to read a book at his level rather than the text the whole class was reading. Thus Tahir started to read the book *Stone Fox* by John Reynolds Gardiner with Ms. Matthews and with Katie, a preservice teacher who had been working with Tahir one-on-one for four months.

During the second round of interviews, Tahir indicated that *Stone Fox* was now one of his favorite books. He also indicated that he was highly motivated to read the Diary of a Wimpy Kid series because Katie had given him the first book in the series as a gift when she was done with her field experience at the school. These were books that he could comprehend, and he experienced success reading them, which increased his reading motivation.

This example illustrates the importance of matching the reading materials to the capabilities of the reader. Krashen (1988) proposed his i + 1 theory, wherein i is the current level of the language learner, whereas i + 1 is the comprehensible input. Krashen explained that second language learners need to be given input that is one step beyond their current stage of linguistic competence. In other words, teachers would need to provide instruction, or in this case reading materials, that presents a moderate challenge to the student. Previous research has supported this as well; if students are given materials that are too easy, they become bored, whereas if the material is too difficult then they become frustrated (Turner, 1995).

Teacher recommendations—A new aspect about reading materials was identified by the focal students. They emphasized the importance of teacher recommendations in book selection. The focal students credited their teachers for choosing appropriate and interesting reading materials for them. Nabila noted that her teachers have made recommendations for books that she has really enjoyed. She recalls that when she was just learning how to read in English, her ESL teacher had to be the one to pick out the books that were suitable for her. On a similar note, Jonathan credits his teacher with guiding him on how to choose a good book. The following excerpt illustrates how Jonathan describes how his teacher helped him pick good books.

So then he just tell you what is a good book. How you find a good book is that you look at the back, you look at the picture and then you read the first few chapters and then if there’s graphics, you look at the graphics and how it’s matched with the words, with the pages and with the chapter. At that time I already liked to read but I could not find any good books.

“To motivate ELs to read more in English, we must try to meet their interests both in terms of topics and genres.”

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TAKE ACTION!

1. Focal students identified parents as reading role models, but teachers should also be reading role models. Share with your students what books you are reading and what you like about them. Be enthusiastic about texts you are reading, and hopefully the enthusiasm will be contagious in your classroom.

2. Read widely, enabling you to recommend books for your students. Many of the books mentioned by the focal students as ones they enjoyed were recommended by their teachers.

3. Administer an interest inventory. There are specific interest inventories, such as the “Tell Me What You Like” inventory (McKenna & Stahl, 2008, p. 214). Teachers may also come up with their own topics and write their own interest inventory. Based on the results of the interest inventory, teachers and school librarians can integrate more books in classroom and school libraries containing topics and genres in which students are most interested.

4. As a way to promote integrative motivation, provide opportunities for ELs to participate in group conversations about texts. Use heterogeneous groups so students can be exposed to different viewpoints. You could also use idea circles (Guthrie & McCann, 1996), wherein students are grouped based on a common interest. These could be groups of students at varying levels, and they each read a different text on a common topic. The students come together to share what they have learned from various texts.

5. Provide ideas to parents on how they can become more involved in helping their children become more motivated to read. If possible, translate them into the native languages of the parents. This will give them an opportunity to become more involved, even if it is just by requiring their child to read more at home or engaging in conversations about what their child is reading.

Jonathan’s last statement is very telling, indicating that even though he is a motivated reader, he was not quite sure what book to choose. Thus, even though he might have been given autonomy in choosing books to read, he did not know how to choose books that he would enjoy without teacher guidance.

These findings indicate that ELs have preferences for the kinds of reading materials they want to read; however, students might initially need guidance on finding appropriate books for their reading level or they might not be knowledgeable about how to choose books. We know that autonomy is important in fostering reading motivation among students, but we may have to scaffold student choices because students might initially need support in choosing books to read. Based on teachers’ knowledge about topics or genres that interest their students, they may identify a few books that a particular student might like and have the student choose from these options. This practice would allow teachers to recommend books but still allow students to have a choice in what they read.

Final Thoughts

Cummins (2011) asserted that based on research on ELs, we can assume that what is good instruction for all is also good instruction for ELs, but with some modifications. The same holds true about ELs’ reading motivation. Perceived competence, interesting reading materials, and social motivation are all factors that are prominent in the reading motivation field, and they also seem to contribute to ELs’ reading motivation.

More importantly, this study revealed additional factors we must consider to motivate ELs to read. First, reading seems to be a way for ELs to make bonds with their American peers, as focal students indicated they turned to friends from another culture for conversations about books. One way to promote the social aspect of reading is to use discussion groups, literature circles, book clubs, or book buddies in classrooms. These strategies will provide an avenue for ELs to discuss the texts that they are reading with various classmates and learn from different viewpoints.

Second, we need to highlight the value of reading. Those students who were motivated saw that reading in English contributed to improving other literacy skills, such as writing or increasing vocabulary. We need to explicitly note how reading helps ELs in concrete ways, especially for the struggling readers who may not see the immediate value of reading. ELs will have an enhanced awareness and appreciation of the impact of reading if teachers point out specific ways in which reading helps them to become better at English.

Emphasizing the value of reading is connected to building ELs’ sense of competence. ELs, especially those still learning English, need to experience reading books at their independent level. If students do not feel like they can succeed at learning English or improve their English reading skills, it is unlikely they will be motivated to read. This underscores the need for teachers to be aware of students’ literacy
abilities so they can recommend books with which students can be successful. If we remember Tahir’s example, when he had to read a difficult text, he was unmotivated. When matched with a text that was at his level, Tahir was more motivated because he experienced successful reading.

In sum, this study provides examples of ELs who were motivated to read in English. These students came to the country not knowing much, or even any, English, and yet after a few years have become voracious readers. My hope is that this article prompts educators to think about additional ways in which they can motivate ELs. Let us all work on getting more ELs to become passionate and motivated readers.

REFERENCES


Supporting Information
Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article:

Research Supplement: Study Overview.

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IRA Journal Article
- "Even More!" "The Association Between Parental Involvement in Reading And Schooling and Children’s Reading Engagement in Latino Families" by Gustavo Loera, Robert Rueda, and Jonathan Nakamoto, *Literacy Research and Instruction, April/May/June 2011*