Does Reading a Book About Culture Increase Reading Frequency and Duration?

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Abstract
The purpose of this study was to determine if the reading of a book that pertained to an individual’s culture increased reading frequency and duration. The subjects included 33 English students in a high school special education class. Before the study began, all students signed and returned a permission slip. The groups were formed by the researcher dividing each of the classes into two groups. The data collected for this study were obtained by student-kept time cards. The method for use in this study was a group design. It was hypothesized that reading a book that pertained to one’s culture will increase reading frequency and duration.

Introduction
Reading is a necessity of modern life. How well a person is able to read depends on how long and how often one reads. As in playing a sport, a person must practice to become proficient. Furthermore, reading remains an important skill throughout life. Kelder (1998) states, “regardless of how people use literacy, it continues to shape how individuals understand themselves, our world, and others, and it contributes to the creation of culture” (p.21). With the increased use of standardized tests and the basic need to read to survive in society, it is of utmost importance that students receive enough reading practice to become proficient readers.

The Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) (1996) reports that according to the 1990 Census Bureau the percentage of illiterates in the State of Texas was 12.3%, while the national average was 9.4%. While these numbers were not broken down by age, one can clearly see that the rate of illiteracy is a problem. Among poor readers and non-readers is a second group of students who are essentially illiterate with regard to either their own culture or the cultures of others. Much of the required reading in the classroom has had little reference to the daily lives and cultures of the student. Willis (2000) stated, “Historically, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have not experienced high levels of academic success because their literacy needs were under-addressed as they were encouraged to assimilate into the mainstream (p. 1).” Such materials have been uninteresting and hard to understand for students with little knowledge of the topics and contexts of the materials.
According to Au (2002) the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has documented for many years the lower reading levels of students from diverse cultures. Also Au (2002) states that at grade twelve, the reading levels of African Americans and Hispanics were the same as Whites at grade eight (p.392). In Texas schools, Hispanics make up a large percentage of the school population. Jimenez (2002) states “Latinos now constitute the largest group of minority students in the United States, calculated at 13.5 percent” (p.1). Jimenez (2002) goes on to state that Latinos experienced a 59 percent growth rate in the 1990’s, and the numbers continue to grow to the present time.

Too often the public school’s focus has not included various ethnic groups. Instead of embracing different cultures in the schools, teachers and administrators have tried to fit all students into the same cultural mold. By not recognizing differences, educators created cultural divides both in the schools and in the community. The problem of separation is further emphasized in the classrooms when only English language and literature are studied. Emphasizing one culture to the exclusion of other cultures may lead minority students to devalue their own heritages. Further, minority students may not relate to materials that have no reference to their own experiences.

Therefore, it was hypothesized that reading materials about the students’ cultures and the cultures of their friends and acquaintances would generate greater interest in reading the materials and result in more time being spent reading.

**Methods**

**Description of the Population**

All students in the study attended a high school in a low-income area. It was an older school, which had recently undergone extensive remodeling. The demographics of the communities around the school were approximately ninety-five percent Hispanic. The entire school population was 3,200 students. This population was drawn from apartments, trailer parks, low-income housing, and some new homes. The ethnic breakdown of the school was 83% Hispanic, 10% Anglo, 5% black, and 2% Asian.

**Description of the Sample**

The participants in this study were special education high school students ages fourteen to twenty. This population of students was chosen due to the fact that the researcher teaches them on a daily basis. Furthermore, these students are poor to non-readers, and if there were a population in a school that needs to increase time spent reading it would be this population. Thirty-three students were included in this study, divided into two groups. The ages of some of the students in the study were higher than normal for high school students because special needs students are allowed to stay in high school until the year of their 22nd birthday.

The study involved a wide range of reading and ability levels. The range included disabled students who read only a grade or two below grade level to some who read on grade level but could not remember what they have read. To accommodate for the range of abilities, books of different levels were used.
Materials

Two library carts containing thirty to forty books each, and the student time cards were used in this study.

Procedures

The following procedures were used for the study. First, two carts of books were compiled by the researcher and the librarians in the participating high school. Carts were color-coded but had no other identifying characteristics. On one of the carts were books about different cultures, and the other cart contained books having nothing to do with cultures, but of general interest to the students. The level of the books varied to accommodate the different reading levels.

Second, each of the classes was broken into two different groups, A and B. For the first week of the study the students went to the library, and picked books from cart A, that were of a general interest. The times that the students read were recorded on their time cards. This was done to establish the time spent reading before a group was required to read from the cart of cultural-related materials.

Third, after the baseline scores were taken, one group of students began to read from the cart that contained cultural-related books. For the purposes of this study cultural-related books were books that pertained to the way a certain culture lived, famous people of a culture, and where a culture was located. The other group continued to read from the cart that contained books of general interest. General interest materials were non-fiction books. Since the use of a specific person of culture is impossible to omit from certain non-fiction books, the book was considered general interest as long as it did not elaborate on the specific characteristics of the culture. These were the parameters that were suggested by the school librarian to define the differences between the books about culture and general interest. Both groups went to the library and checked out books off the color-coded carts. Students were not informed about the difference between the carts but were assigned a certain color cart for the duration of the study.

Each student was issued color-coded time cards, which matched the color of the book carts from which they selected a book. They were asked to record the amount of time they spend reading outside of school each day. Individual names and book titles were not recorded. Each Monday, the cards from the week before were collected and kept in a folder for each group. New cards were issued for the current week. The project ran for four consecutive weeks. At the end of four weeks, the totals of each group were tabulated and the results graphed.

Data Analysis

For the purposes of this study, a group design approach was used. As assumed by the name, group designs are used when a comparison of groups is needed on some dependent variable. The sets of books and the set of students were the constants in this study. Both groups of students were similar in number and reading abilities. Both library carts contained a similar number and reading levels of materials. The dependent variable was how long each group read. The item that was measured was the time that was spent
reading each week. At the end of each week, the time on the cards for each group was totaled. The hypothesis was tested by making comparisons between the average amount of time students spent reading cultural-based materials and materials of general interest, these comparisons will determine if the hypothesis can be rejected or not. For the purposes of this study a t-Test can be run to measure difference between the groups. The results are shown on bar graphs, each graph has time on the y-axis and the reading material topics or groups on the x-axis. The bars are labeled to show the difference between each group. The actual difference between the groups for each week is noted.

**Results**

Student data are reported and graphs displaying the times read for each group are presented. At the time the study was started the school changed some of the schedules of the students that were going to participate. In addition to this, some of the participant’s parents would not agree to allow their child to participate. Due to these factors the number of participants dropped from 50 to 33, with 17 students reading cultural-related text, and 16 students reading general interest text.

The results for week one as shown in Week One Totals graph, indicate that the average amount of time read by each student in the group reading general interest books was 87.8 minutes. At the same time, the average amount of time read by each student in the group reading about culture was 83.2 minutes. The difference between the two groups was, on average, 4.6 minutes per student – in favor of the general interest-reading group.
The results for week two as shown in Week Two Totals graph, indicate that the average amount of time read by each student in the group reading general interest books was 83.8 minutes. At the same time, the average amount of time read by each student in the group reading about culture was 157.7 minutes. The difference between the two groups was, on average, 73.9 minutes per student – in favor of the cultural-interest group.

The results for week three as shown in Week Three Totals graph, indicate that the average amount of time read by each student in the group reading general interest books was 53.1 minutes. At the same time, the average amount of time read by each student in the group reading about culture was 53.8 minutes. The difference between the two groups was, on average, .7 minutes per student – in favor of the cultural-interest group.
The results of week four as shown in Week Four Totals graph, indicate that the average amount of time read by each student in the group reading general interest books was 176.9 minutes. At the same time, the average amount of time read by each student in the group reading about culture was 33.4 minutes. The difference between the two groups was, on average, 143.5 minutes per student – in favor of the general interest group.

The results for the entire four-week span as shown in Four Week Totals graph, indicate that the average amount of time read by each student in the group reading general interest books was 401.6 minutes. At the same time, the average amount of time read by each student in the group reading about culture was 328.1 minutes. The difference between the two groups was, on average, 73.5 minutes per student – in favor of the general interest group. Since the research hypothesis was that the Culture Reading Group would read more than the General Reading Group and the reverse occurred, there was no need to test the null hypothesis. The research hypothesis is rejected due to the result that the General Reading Group read more than the Culture Reading Group.
Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to show if reading a book that pertained to a culture caused the reader to read for a longer duration. As the information shows, on average, the general interest group read the most the first week. However, in the second and third weeks the cultural-interest group read the most. In the forth and final week, the group reading general interest read substantially more, allowing them to obtain a higher average. In talking to some of the students in this group, that decrease in time was due to three things, boredom in reading, an unwillingness to read generally, and a lack of desire to read about cultures that did not pertain to theirs. During that same time the general interest group continued to read at a more constant rate, and therefore ended up reading in total for a longer period of time.

Implications for Classroom Practice

This study could be useful because the teacher could allow students to read general interest materials to build reading skills and increase the amount of reading that occurs for the students. The teacher could also have students read about other cultures to gain insight, although the students might read less, they would still be reading and refining their reading skills. This study also shows the need for more and better reading materials to stimulate students.

Recommendations for Further Studies

This study was done using a collection of books that pertained to different cultures from around the world. Further studies can be taken using one specific culture that is the same or in the same region of the world as the majority of the students being used. Doing this would allow the students who are reading about culture to maintain interest for a longer period of time, decreasing or possibly eliminating the drop in time due to lack of interest in other cultures.

This study could also be conducted using more, and better quality reading materials. Using better materials could entice the subjects to read more, and by doing this gain better reading skills.

Another study could be conducted using low-level readers, not resource students. By doing this, one eliminates the need to categorize the books into grade levels for the students. This might allow the students a wider range of books to choose from.

Training students on how to complete time cards, restricting reading times to only during the school day, and spot checking the time cards for accuracy are additional ways that you could modify this study in the future.
References