

Using Quality Children's Literature to Increase Language Minority Students' Reading Levels

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Introduction

I wanted to raise my first grade students' reading levels at Glen Forest Elementary School. Based on what I was seeing in the classroom, I saw a need to change the way my children were approaching reading. My first graders showed little interest and motivation in reading books. They also showed minimal oral language in the classroom. This lack of vocabulary had a significant impact on their ability to read and comprehend stories in their guided-reading groups. It was evident that they needed to increase their oral language and exposure to literature.

Focus

For this project I wanted to find a fun and engaging activity/program that would help the students raise their reading levels. I chose to develop an "author study" program in my classroom. This program implemented quality children's literature in a thematic approach. The "author study" was developed to help improve the reading ability of my students.

Review of Literature

Research supports that children learn better through a thematic approach to instruction (Ghosn, 1994). A thematic approach also works well with non-native speakers of English (Ghosn, 1994). She suggests that children's literature should "offer a natural and interesting medium for language acquisition; they [books] contain predictable, repetitive patterns that reinforce vocabulary and structures" (Ghosn, 1994). When choosing literature, a teacher must remember that "quality literature presents a multitude of discussion topics- from the literal to the topics that transcend the story to allow children to link the story to their own lives" (Ghosn, 1994).

I wanted to provide the children with environment that allows for meaningful oral language interactions. Inoue (1998) describes how classrooms need to encourage English as a Second Language (ESL) students' reading by "using rereading and concepts into students' existing knowledge by using prereading and postreading discussions and open-ended questions."

Providing materials and tools for learning comprehension techniques is also suggested to further enhance the reading of the ESL student. Karen Kow Yip Cheng says, "By listening to stories children learn in turn to tell stories which involve communicating meaning" (Cheng, 2001). Cheng states a few benefits of listening to stories:

- 1) It feeds the child's imagination.
- 2) It hones the child's listening skills.
- 3) It extends the child's vocabulary.
- 4) It raises the child's level of proficiency in the language (Cheng, 2001).

Research Question

Will exposing children to quality children's literature help increase the reading level of language minority children?

Subjects

My subjects for this project were my class of sixteen first-grade students from Glen Forest Elementary School in Fairfax County, Virginia. These students come from various backgrounds ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Students in the classroom come from countries: Bolivia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Iran, China, and the United States.

Books Lists for the Author Studies

Books for several different author studies were collected. Books collected for Eric Carle's "author study" included: *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, *The Tiny Seed*, *Pancakes! Pancakes!*, *The Grouchy Ladybug*, *Have You Seen My Cat?* *The Very Quiet Cricket*, *The Very Busy Spider*, *Little Cloud*, and *Today is Monday*.

Books collected for the William Steig "author study" included: *The Amazing Bone* (a Caldecott Honor Book and New York Times Outstanding Book of the Year), *Shrek!*, *Wizzil*, *Brave Irene*, *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* (a Caldecott Honor Book), *Doctor De Soto* (a Newberry Honor Book), and *Doctor De Soto Goes to Africa*. The movie "Shrek" was also included in this "author study." The movie was adapted from Steig's *Shrek!*.

Cynthia Rylant's "author study" collection included these books: *Mr. Putter and Tabby Walk the Dog*, *Mr. Putter and Tabby Row the Boat*, *Mr. Putter and Tabby Fly the Plane*, *The Relatives Came* (a Caldecott Honor Book), *Little Whistle's Dinner Party*, *When I Was Young in the Mountains*, *Mr. Putter and Tabby Bake the Cake*, *The Old Woman Who Named Things*, and *The Great Gracie Chase: Stop That Dog!*.

Method for Author Studies

After first collecting baseline data on students' reading levels (see *Data Collection* in this paper), I then introduced the first "author study" with the well-known author/illustrator Eric Carle. His book collection was in the library section of the classroom with a display board including his name, picture, a short biography, and several book cover pictures. This section of the library was dedicated solely to "author study" books. The students learned to take care of the books and the display.

After that, I implemented "read alouds" with each book. These "read alouds" incorporated predictions, picture walks, readings, and open discussions. After reading each book 2-3 times, I asked the students several story component

questions and wrote students' oral responses on chart paper that was displayed in front of the classroom:

- What did you notice about the illustrations?
- What were the characters in the story?
- Where did the setting take place?
- What was the problem in the story?
- What was the solution?
- What was the moral or message in the story?

Next, I gave them an art project to do after the "author study." This art project was a collage of their favorite Eric Carle book.

After Eric Carle, we proceeded to study the well-known author William Steig. The same procedure was implemented for Steig's "author study." Instead of an art project at the end of the "author study," the students watched the movie "Shrek."

The Cynthia Rylant "author study" followed William Steig. I, again, approached the "author study" in the same manner as the ones before. At the end of this cycle, students drew and wrote about their favorite Cynthia Rylant book.

Data Collection

Before beginning the author studies, I had administered the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) in the beginning of the school year as part of my pre-assessment data. The DRA is designed to assess the children's reading level. E. Jane Williams, Ph.D. from The Ohio State University describes the DRA as "a reading assessment used to guide teachers' ongoing observations of student progress over time within a literature-based reading program." (Hurst, 2002). The DRA consists of texts and the assessment forms. The assessment and data collection are made through observations. These observations are then recorded onto observation forms. The observation forms provide the teacher with directions and prompts. The running record forms are then calculated through "the student's accuracy (percentage) rating when reading the DRA text, as well as self-correction and error rates for his/her reading." (Hurst, 2002).

Pre-assessment data was collected from 16 students in the beginning of the school year through the DRA process. Running records were collected and calculated. These records, along with the oral responses to comprehension questions, gave an accurate indication as to what level the children were reading on, according to the DRA reading scale. The DRA reading scale begins at the lowest level of achievement, Level A. The scale then proceeds to Level 1 and goes up to Level 44. The observation forms gave an in-depth look at their reading behaviors and their reading comprehension skills associated with text. After the data was collected and analyzed, the children's reading level was determined.

Finally, the students were given the DRA as a post-assessment data collection. Student D's results were not included because the student entered the classroom after the initial DRA testing was administered. Figure 1 shows students' DRA reading levels.

Figure 1
Students DRA Levels

Student	Initial Reading Level	Final Reading Level	Change in Levels
A	1	6	+5
B	3	16	+13
C	1	4	+3
D	Not taken	12	n/a
E	Below A	2	+2
F	Below A	4	+4
G	3	16	+13
H	1	4	+3
I	2	6	+4
J	4	16	+12
K	8	38	+30
L	6	38	+32
M	Below A	1	+1
N	1	12	+11
O	A	4	+4
P	3	16	+13

Conclusion

The data collected shows that all of the 16 students made an increase in their reading level. In fact, two students improved by over 30 levels! However, 5 students improved by between 11-13 levels and 8 students still improved by 5 levels or less. Of concern, one student remained at level 1. These results suggest that exposing ESL students to quality children's literature through an "author study" program helped increase their reading levels.

Other significant observations from this study were found. It was found that there was a noticeable increase in oral response on the observation forms for those students who started out at a level 3 or higher. Students were able to recognize the setting more specifically, recall the characters' names, and point out the events in the story. It was found that the students that started below level 3 spoke more about what happened in the story in the "predictions" section of the DRA. Overall, the students increased in oral response and increased their reading level scores.

Of course, my students did not reach a higher DRA level solely through the exposure to literature or to the "author studies." Other factors played a role, such as various writing activities, guided reading instruction, "buddy reading,"

and other classroom activities. These results may also be due to extra exposure to literature at home, to the level of language proficiency he or she started at, and/or due to the personality of the individual.

References

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