

## **Action Research: What Is the Impact of Intercultural Literature on ELLs' Reading Comprehension and Reading Engagement?**

*by Wenxiu Ma*

"I want to read!" Y, a first-grade new immigrant student in the bilingual class where I was doing student teaching, exclaimed these decisive words instead of her usual greeting as she bounded into class one day. Her demand expressed the interest in reading that I had been hoping to hear. But this gratifying demand also confirmed my belief that my students, who are very beginning English learners, were hungry for reading that supported their bilingual/ bicultural identities. My hopes rested on a specifically designed instruction plan to incorporate culturally relevant reading strategies and intercultural reading materials, defined as "reading materials which relate to, involve, or represent readers" (Cazden & Legett, 1987, p. 29), with the goal of raising students' reading comprehension and reading engagement.

This will introduce an action research project that focused on the impact of intercultural reading materials and culturally relevant reading instructions on the first-grade ELLs' reading comprehension and reading engagement. This action research shows some positive relationship between utilizing intercultural reading materials and students' reading performance. In my study, students deeply and joyously engaged in intercultural reading, and their reading comprehension level was significantly improved by providing them the culturally friendly reading materials and giving them an opportunity to express cross-cultural understanding.

The setting of this study, which took place September through November 2013, was a first-grade dual Chinese-English bilingual class in a public elementary school in downtown Brooklyn. The class was composed of 32 students from Chinese monolingual families.

My data collection falls into five categories: running records, anecdotal records, reading logs, teacher interviews, and parent questionnaires. The participants in my data collection included six students in my intercultural group, which provided more opportunity to explore intercultural literature, their parents, and the classroom teacher. The six students in my intercultural group were two intervention readers, two on-level readers, and two from advanced readers in this class. The rest of the students in the class are considered in the control group.


The running record was the most important method I used to evaluate my students' reading level. I did two running records for each student in my intercultural group every two weeks. Running record 1 was about a text from a mainstream setting that was not culturally relevant to my students; Running record 2 was about an intercultural text that related to and drew from my students' Chinese-English bicultural identity. My running records focused on two activities: The first activity was comprehension conversation and the second activity was writing about reading.

Based on the data from the comprehension conversation activity, intercultural reading materials contributed to all students' reading comprehension. The total score shows that the

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Mid-Autumn Festival

Write about the ways Chinese people celebrate the Mid-autumn Festival. You can draw a picture to go with your writing.




In the Mid-Autumn Festival, people dress nice cloth and shoe and hair. then eat many good food on table. People see moon, and moon is big and round in sky. At last, eat moon cake. It is sweet. I like eat moon-cake.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### More than a Pet

Write about the ways dogs help people. You can draw a picture to go with your writing.



Dogs is play people cheer people up when they are sad. Royal make sure safe for Lily to walk.

intervention students, on-level students, and advanced students improved 1.5 points out of 9, 2.5 points out of 9, and 3 points out of 9, respectively. These gains, however, were not equal for all students; the advanced students improved more than the intervention students. The data from the writing about reading activity demonstrate that most students were motivated to write about the texts that are relevant to their culture. From many collected samples, I can see how my students drew sophisticated pictures and used plenty of background knowledge to complete their writing of the culturally relevant texts. In contrast, I found that students were not motivated to write and draw about text that is not culturally friendly to them. Please refer to the image as an example.

In addition to the data from the running records, the anecdotal record cards contain the information about students' reading performance from a variety of reading activities, such as independent reading, guided reading, and read aloud. From this information, I found students to be deeply engrossed in reading intercultural literature.

The data from students' take-home reading logs and parents' questionnaires show that students in my intercultural group had much more positive changes when they read beyond the classroom than did the students in the control group. Many parents made positive comments to support their observations, such as "My daughter has liked to tell me about the stories she read from books since she started school this semester."

I interviewed my mentor teacher three times during my study: before the study, in the middle of the study, and at the end of the study. She found value in providing students intercultural reading materials and was willing to continue to provide intercultural reading instructions to all students in her class.

From this action research, I found that utilizing intercultural reading materials led to greatly improved reading comprehension and engagement in my students. All educators who work in the ESL/bilingual field should raise awareness that using intercultural reading materials will benefit ELLs' reading performance. From this study, I recommend that every ESL/bilingual classroom library include a rich intercultural literature collection and that ESL teachers look for more intercultural reading materials through a variety of resources, such as local libraries, bookstores, and intercultural websites. Participating in professional training that focuses on multicultural/intercultural practice and taking a course related to multicultural/intercultural literature will be helpful to all ESL teachers in developing intercultural teaching skills.

## **References**

Cazden, C., & Legett, E. (1981) Culturally responsive education: Recommendations for achieving Lau remedies II. In H. Trueba, G. Guthrie, & K. Au (Eds.), *Culture and the bilingual classroom: Studies in classroom ethnography*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

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