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The Effects of Supplementary Reading Activities for Spanish Heritage Learners

An Action Research Report

By Gayle Brownlow

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The Effects of Supplementary Reading Activities
for Spanish Heritage Learners

By Gayle Brownlow

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in fulfillment of final requirements for the MAED degree

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Advisor_____

Date_____

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Abstract

The intent of the research was to determine if the use of supplementary reading activities involving cultural topics would increase reading proficiency of secondary Spanish heritage learners. Sixteen heritage learners participated in the study: nine girls and seven boys. At the time of the study, two students were in Spanish II, seven students were in Spanish III, six students were in Spanish IV and one student was in Spanish V. The four data sources for this research included the following: a student self-assessment, formative and summative assessments, a survey, and a teacher journal. These data revealed that the reading comprehension scores did increase for the heritage learners who participated in the study. The results of this research indicate that differentiation through reading is beneficial for heritage learners. In addition, the cultural connections in the readings were a key to sparking interest for participants.

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Why would someone who already knows the Spanish language take a high school Spanish class? My heritage learners told me they take Spanish to connect to their culture, learn more vocabulary, and learn how to read and write in the language. Heritage learners are individuals who are either foreign-born immigrants or descendants of foreign-born individuals (often first to fourth generation). These individuals might speak and/or hear the heritage language in their homes and with their friends, but receive their education in English (Yanguas, 2010). These students demonstrate a range of proficiency in the Spanish language. As a Secondary Spanish teacher, I teach both traditional learners and heritage learners. One of my most challenging tasks is to meet the needs of heritage learners while teaching basic language skills to the traditional learners. Including readings about cultural topics could be the key to better meeting the needs of these unique learners.

My heritage learners frequently struggle with assignment completion and attendance in many of their classes. They are often bored in their Spanish class and do not see the need to learn the skills in the class; therefore, they often do not achieve a good grade in the course. They feel they already know the language; however, they display weaknesses in writing and reading.

In regards to motivation, Yanguas (2010) referenced Gardner's socio-educational model of second language acquisition. Gardner specified motivation and attitudes as being vital components to learning a language. What is the motivation for heritage learners in the Spanish classroom? Although some may believe that placing heritage

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learners in a Spanish classroom might provide these students with an easy and good grade, there are many other positive motivations as identified by Peyton, Lewelling and Winke (2001). First, the formal class setting can be a manner for heritage learners to maintain the language of their heritage. Second, these students can expand their bilingual range. One must view language fluency as a scale with a range, not as a specific point to reach. The language class can give heritage learners a broader command of the language. Third, students can learn a more formal Spanish that is proper in business and academic situations. Fourth, the literacy skills the students gain in their heritage language can transfer to their English literacy. Finally, identity is an integral part of the language. Students can maintain their culture and become more culturally literate about other Spanish-speaking cultures (Sweley, 2006).

The ideal situation to meet the unique needs of these learners is to form a class of Spanish for Native Speakers/Heritage Learners. Unfortunately, my school does not have the population and funding to support such a program. Therefore, I need to make adaptations in the Spanish classroom in order to differentiate for these learners. As confirmed by Winke and Stafford (2002), these students have the right to instruction that builds on their existing knowledge and competencies, no matter how small the population of Spanish-speaking students. The placement of heritage learners in a Spanish classroom can be a positive move by a school. Heritage learners can be successful in the class, make connections with their own culture and language, learn skills that can be transferred to English and help them be successful in school.

Heritage learners should work on all modalities of language learning: speaking, listening, reading and writing. Reading and writing in the heritage language are usually

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the two weakest modalities for heritage learners, because they have not had the same exposure to these modalities as they have had to speaking and listening in Spanish. In addition, Callahan (2010) found that the U.S. Latinos in her study named a link to their culture and heritage as the most rewarding aspect of studying the Spanish language. Therefore, I decided to focus on the following action research question: In what ways will the use of supplementary reading activities involving cultural topics increase reading proficiency of secondary Spanish heritage learners?

In order to practice reading and writing skills, I knew I needed to try a variety of approaches. Sauret (2009) suggested that heritage learners read together for fifteen minutes and help each other with comprehension and vocabulary. She also suggested that students' vocabulary would expand by increasing reading practice. In the Materials Development Project, Maria Carreira (2002) outlined ways in which to develop and expand literacy skills for heritage learners. She suggested the use of a variety of written genres, such as interviews, oral histories, short stories, poetry and academic essays. Carreira (2002) suggested that teachers utilize pre- and post-reading strategies and gradually help students learn to produce each genre. Finally, readings should be about cultural topics and issues pertaining to the cultures.

Heritage learners come to the class bringing cultural knowledge with them (MacGregor-Mendoza, 2012). Teachers should incorporate the students' cultural knowledge into the class. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) has established five national standards for the foreign language classroom. One of the five standards is culture. Maria Carreira's Materials Development Project for the National Heritage Language Resource Center (2002) showed an example of how to

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embed culture into instruction for heritage learners. Each lesson incorporated a reading or activity involving a Spanish-speaking person or place. One lesson also discussed the experiences of Latino immigrants in the United States. North Carolina's curriculum for heritage learners strives to recognize the "cultural and linguistic wealth and strengths that students bring to school" (Sweley, 2006, p. 23). Cultural sensitivity by the teacher is important in all aspects of instruction. Spanish teachers should help heritage learners feel proud about their bilingualism and cultural knowledge. By utilizing readings pertaining to cultural topics, my goal was to increase the heritage learners' motivation to do well and therefore increase success in the class.

Assessment for heritage learners should be varied and include both formative and summative methods. In her article about formative assessment in heritage learner teaching, Carreira (2012) suggested that teachers use "journals, portfolios, surveys, oral interviews, and presentations, among others" (p. 105). She also stressed the importance of feedback from the teacher and self-assessment by the students. According to Carreira, teachers need to be aware of their students' attitudes towards learning the language and work to "incorporate the students' voices into instruction" (p. 101). By using formative assessment, the teacher can improve and modify instruction and the curriculum itself. Heritage learners will have an advantage with tasks involving the spoken language. The teacher should incorporate the spoken language with other, more difficult aspects of language learning.

In order to answer my action research question, "In what ways will the use of supplementary reading activities involving cultural topics increase reading proficiency of secondary Spanish heritage learners?", I formed reading clubs in each of my Spanish

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courses (second year through fifth year). According to Hancock (2002), teachers should consider collaborative learning and group-work. The reading clubs would give the students the time to collaborate. They would also give the heritage learners the opportunity to focus on cultural topics pertaining to their heritages.

The participants of my study attend a public high school in a small town in Southern Minnesota. The students are heritage learners of varying degrees of fluency in Spanish. One student is of Cuban descent; all other participants are of Mexican descent. Sixteen students participated in the study; nine of these students are girls, seven are boys.

At the time of the study, two students were in Spanish II, seven students were in Spanish III, six students were in Spanish IV and one student was in Spanish V. In the next section, I will describe the research process I used to determine if readings about cultural topics increased the reading comprehension of these Secondary Spanish heritage learners.

Description of Research Process

I conducted the action research between November 18, 2012 and February 20, 2013. I gave a self-assessment to heritage learners in five classes (see Appendix A). Following the self-assessment, the heritage learners completed three reading units. They completed the first unit December 7, the second unit on December 21 and the final unit on January 18. Each unit focused on a different genre of reading and required students to do a variety of assessments. The four data sources for this research included the following: (1) a student self-assessment, (2) formative and summative assessments, (3) a survey, and (4) a teacher journal.

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Prior to beginning instruction and collecting data, I advertised my action research to all of my classes by writing an announcement on my board in regards to a reading club. I told students that reading club participants would be doing alternate work that involved reading and writing. They would complete the work during class time and would not need to complete regular class work during the days they worked with the reading club. During reading club weeks, participants could expect to do regular classwork two of the days and alternate work three days. Students in the reading club could opt out of the club at any time if it became too difficult. Interested students took home a permission slip written in both English and Spanish for their parents to sign (see Appendix B).

All heritage learners who returned the permission slip then completed the Self-Assessment for Heritage Learners (see Appendix A). The purpose of the initial assessment was to have the heritage learners give background about their use of Spanish and English. On the self-assessment, respondents ranked their abilities of listening, speaking, reading and writing in both Spanish and English. The form also asked the respondents a series of yes and no questions in regards to their beliefs about knowing Spanish. For example, students responded yes or no to the statement, “Knowing Spanish is a valuable skill”. Finally, students responded to two open-ended questions about their reasons for being in a Spanish class.

Participants then completed a summative assessment as a pretest. All students read a legend in Spanish and responded to questions about the readings. Spanish II (hereafter referred to as intermediate) students read a different legend than the students in Spanish III, IV and V (hereafter referred to as advanced). The legend for intermediate

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students was Central American; the legend for the advanced group was Mexican. All questions for the advanced students were in Spanish and required answers in Spanish. The intermediate students answered most questions in Spanish; however, a few of the questions were in English.

The first genre students completed after the initial assessment was a unit about legends. Because I determined through my research that the readings should be about cultural topics, I utilized Mexican legends for both groups. All but one of the heritage learners are of Mexican heritage. My choice was very purposeful to use this as the first unit, due to the heritage represented by the majority of participants in the reading club. While working with the reading club tasks, students had the choice to read alone or in groups. Most of the students chose to work with at least one other person. The formative assessment for the intermediate group included reading strategies for prediction, vocabulary help and drawing conclusions. The formative assessment for the advanced group was a group writing assignment. In groups, students completed a pre-writing worksheet (see Appendix C) and then developed the information into a written legend of their own. This task was open-ended and creative.

The second genre students completed was a unit on holiday customs in Spanish-speaking countries. Both intermediate and advanced groups completed the same task (see Appendix D). I directed students to internet sites in Spanish to learn about a holiday of their choice, from a Spanish-speaking country of their choice. They completed a Venn diagram to compare and contrast the holiday they researched with something we do or celebrate in the United States. Students then presented the information they learned to the other students in the class. They had the option to utilize technology in their

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presentations. While many of the heritage learners presented in English with some Spanish words intermingled in the presentation, a few of the heritage learners in the advanced group presented entirely in Spanish.

After completing the second unit in December, the participants completed a survey to give me feedback about their work with the reading club (see Appendix E). The survey asked students what they liked about the club and what they found most difficult about the club. Students ranked their formative assessments on a scale to indicate the level of difficulty of each. I also asked students via the survey whether they had tried to read in Spanish outside of class time and whether they wished to continue their participation in the club. Finally, students could write their questions, comments and suggestions for me. The purpose of this survey was to allow me to make adaptations for the third and final genre of the reading club.

For the last unit, I assigned different tasks to the heritage learners in the intermediate and advanced groups. The intermediate group read a non-fiction selection about Andean musical traditions. Students completed comprehension questions about the reading. The advanced group went to an online student newspaper in Spanish. I instructed them to choose an article posted in November, December or January. Since all articles were in Spanish, many skimmed extra articles while trying to choose their favorite. They completed a worksheet (see Appendix F) in which they identified important vocabulary and summarized key facts in the article. They also needed to create two questions about the article and write a personal opinion statement. Students could earn extra credit by completing more than one article and worksheet.

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After the third unit, students completed a post-test by repeating the summative assessment from the beginning of the project. The intermediate group read the same Central American legend they read at the beginning of the study. The advanced group repeated a Mexican legend. Throughout the study, students had the potential of reading about four different cultures. However, through the choices offered in the second and third units, students in the advanced group might have chosen to focus on Mexican culture for all units.

My fourth data source was ongoing throughout the entire study, from November through February. This data source was an electronic teacher journal. I documented my thoughts, ideas, opinions and questions throughout the study. I also recorded observations of student behavior and comments that students made throughout the study.

As an additional component of my project, I worked closely with our media specialist throughout this study to expand the Spanish literature section of our media center. Previously, our media center only contained romance novels and books that were too juvenile for high school students. As the new books arrived, I brought them into my classroom and displayed them in the front of my room. I also added encouraging notes to persuade students to borrow them (see Appendix G). In the media center, the specialist added better signs in both English and Spanish to encourage students to check them out there. In November, our district received a grant that provided free books to students. I was able to give my students the opportunity to take the Spanish-language children's books to give to children they knew could benefit from them. The goal of the grant was to get more books into the hands of children.

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In the next section, I will analyze the data from the student self-assessment, the formative and summative assessments, the survey and the teacher journal. Through data analysis, I will determine if the use of readings on cultural topics increased the reading proficiency of the Spanish heritage learners in my classes.

Analysis of Data

At the culmination of my action research, I began to analyze the data I collected. I had a variety of data types, including quantitative and qualitative to determine if the use of reading clubs in my classes increased the reading comprehension of the heritage learners in my classes.

I first analyzed the data from the self-assessment that all heritage learners completed. These students classified their proficiency in listening, speaking, reading and writing in both English and Spanish. The students ranked their abilities to read and write in Spanish slightly lower than their abilities to listen and speak the same language. I assigned numbers to each ability ranking level for none, low, intermediate, advanced and native-like. Through this process, I was able to determine that the mean score for reading in Spanish was lower than speaking and listening. In addition, the mode of the writing score reflected that students most often ranked their ability for this skill as intermediate, contrary to the native-like ranking for the other skills.

The self-assessment confirmed my research that heritage learners show a variety of reasons for taking a class in their heritage language. As Figure 1 shows, the heritage learners in my classes ranked writing, learning grammar and vocabulary, and studying cultures as primary reasons for taking Spanish. A common misconception is that heritage learners take Spanish classes for an easy credit. Only two of the sixteen respondents gave

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this reason for taking the class. Also noteworthy is that only two of the respondents stated that they took the class to do more reading, although they had marked reading as an area of weakness. Students could give more than one response to this question.

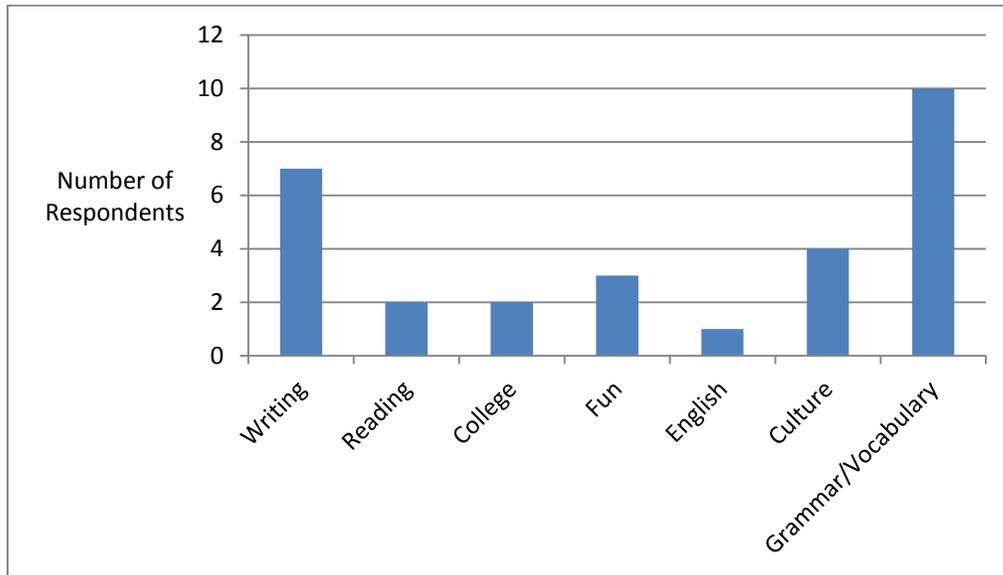


Figure 1. Heritage Learners' reasons for taking a Spanish class.

Advanced reading club participants completed a pretest assessment that included additional questions to decipher why students were interested in participating in the reading group. The responses varied from their reasons for taking a Spanish class. As Figure 2 shows, the students' primary reasons for participating in the club were to practice reading and writing in Spanish, and to experience more challenge in the curriculum. These students were not only looking for more challenge, but they were requesting to work with the modalities they had ranked as their most difficult.

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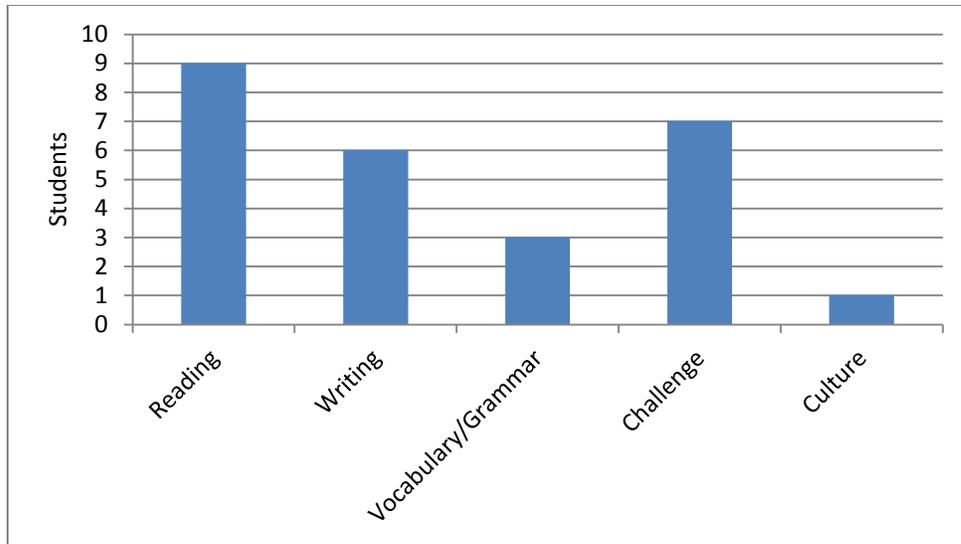


Figure 2. Advanced heritage learners' reasons for participating in the reading club.

The analysis of pretest and posttest scores was unique because many of the heritage learners achieved a perfect score. Ideally, the assessment should have been more difficult to avoid the perfect scores and show more growth. However, I was still able to draw conclusions from the data. A look at the mean scores and standard deviations shows more disparity in the pretest scores (see Table 1). In the table, "N" represents the number of students in each group. A higher standard deviation indicates that there was less variability in the students' scores on the posttest than there was on the pretest. The table indicates a standard deviation of only 0.6 for the advanced group's posttests and zero for the intermediate group's posttests. Both heritage learners in the intermediate group achieved a perfect score on the posttest, which explains the standard deviation of zero.

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Table 1

Pretest and Posttest mean scores with standard deviations

	Advanced Group Mean N = 14	Advanced Group Standard Deviation	Intermediate Mean N = 2	Intermediate Standard Deviation
Pretest	28	1.4	16.5	2.1
Posttest	28.8	0.6	18	0

From the advanced group, the pretests showed 57% of the students achieved a perfect score the first time they took the test. However, on the posttest, nearly 86% of the heritage learners achieved a perfect score. Only 2 learners, or 14%, scored lower on the posttest than they had on the pretest. Both of these learners scored only one point less on the posttest than they had on the pretest. Figure 3 depicts the pretest and posttest scores of the advanced group of heritage learners.

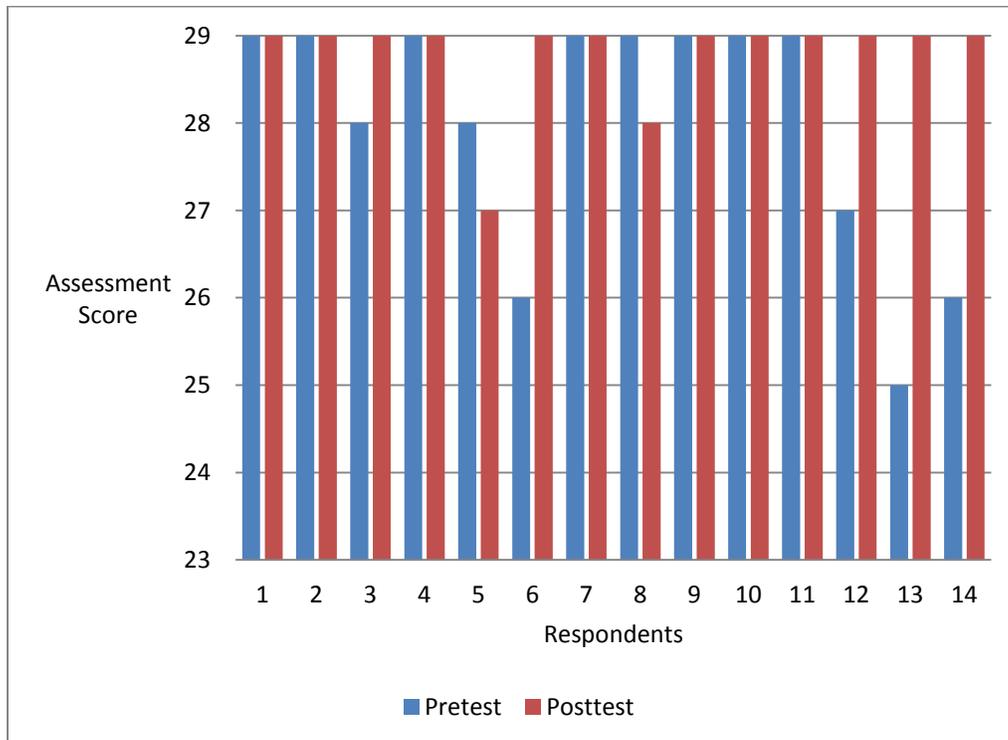


Figure 3. Pretest and posttest scores for advanced group.

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The intermediate group also took pretests and posttests. This group contained three heritage learners originally; however, one student moved to a different class before the end of the study. Of the two remaining heritage learners, one heritage learner gained from 83% on the pretest to 100% on the posttest. The second student achieved a perfect score on both the pretest and the posttest.

After completing two reading club units, the heritage learners completed a survey to indicate their opinions about the activities and assessments they had completed. The respondents indicated that the activities were fun and they most enjoyed the challenge that the reading club offered them. The third facet they found most interesting was the culture incorporated in the activities. In responding to the question about what has been most difficult, students either responded that the writing tasks were most difficult or “nothing” was difficult for them. Just over half of the respondents (56%) had tried to read in Spanish outside of class time. Five of the seven students who had not read in Spanish outside of class time said they wanted to try to do so. All of the respondents expressed interest in continuing their work with the reading club.

I gave my intermediate students a reading assessment at the beginning of second semester. At this time, I had lost some of my first semester students and gained others. The assessment gave me a manner to compare heritage learners and traditional learners who had participated in the reading club with those who had not. Figure 4 shows the median scores on this reading assessment. The scores marked with HL signify heritage learners, whereas those marked with TL signify traditional learners. This graph indicates a higher median score for students who had previously participated in the reading club.

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Although the differences are small, the reading club participants scored higher than students who had not been in the reading club.

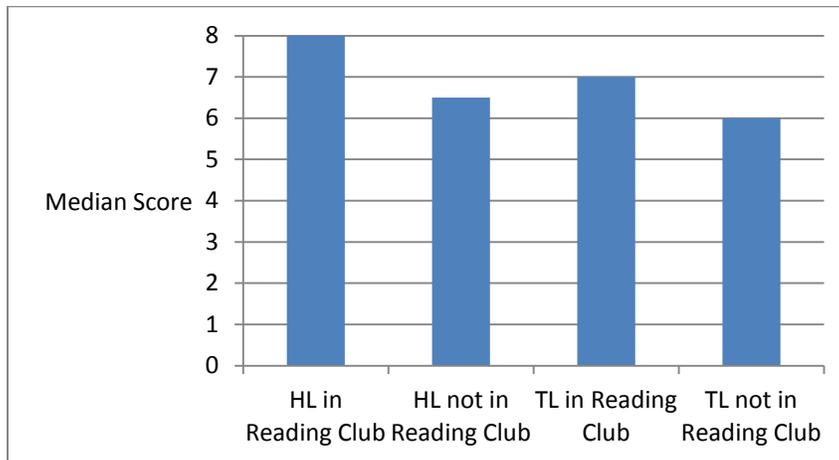


Figure 4. Median scores on second semester reading assessment.

My teacher journal also provided me with insight for other facets of the reading club. Throughout the journal, I documented instances when heritage learners and traditional learners sought literature in Spanish to read outside of class time. In addition, students made comments to me verbally and in writing that they appreciated the rigor of the reading club and the opportunity to choose to work with the club. The heritage learners made interesting connections and comparisons with cultures they studied through the reading club activities. They went beyond mere reporting to analyzing commonalities and differences in cultures.

These data sources reveal to me that the reading comprehension scores did increase for my heritage learners who participated in the reading clubs. Students' pretest and posttest scores indicated improved or perfect reading comprehension for all but two of the sixteen participants. Many students who participated in the reading club activities expressed an appreciation for the challenge offered to them with the differentiated

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curriculum. The cultural connections in the readings were a key to sparking interest for participants.

In the next section, I will outline a plan of action necessary for meeting the needs of the Spanish heritage learners who take my Spanish classes in the future. I will look at ways of determining if other techniques of differentiation could assist these learners to overcome their perceived areas of weaknesses in reading and writing.

Action Plan

Students who participated in the action research were students who accepted a challenge to do more demanding work. Both heritage learners and traditional learners accepted my invitation to participate in the reading club. In addition to the sixteen heritage learner participants, twenty-seven traditional learners participated. They not only completed the tasks I assigned, but they also asked for more.

My strategies, assessments and data collection changed when I broadened the scope of the project to include traditional learners. I did not give an extremely difficult assessment when I gave students the pretest. I was afraid that a difficult pretest would deter traditional learners from the reading club. Therefore, the pretest was too easy for the heritage learners but appropriate for the traditional learners. As I showed in the data analysis, I was still able to draw conclusions from the data collected through pretests and posttests.

Was it appropriate to include traditional learners in research intended for studying reading comprehension in heritage learners? I feel the success of the reading club is due to the inclusion of all students from the beginning. All students had the opportunity to join the reading club; therefore, no one was excluded or singled out as being a chosen

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member. Heritage learners could feel pride for taking on an extra challenge rather than being students of a selected race who needed to do different work. Traditional learners could feel empowered to complete the same work as the heritage learners who grew up speaking Spanish. Both heritage learners and traditional learners knew they could leave the reading club if the tasks were too difficult. Students who chose not to participate were perfectly content to continue with the regular classwork and did not feel excluded in any way from an opportunity.

The results of this action research study will change my practice in two areas. First, I will continue to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of the heritage learners in my classes. I will seek to embed grammar and vocabulary through reading and writing practices. I will continue to incorporate lessons about cultures of Spanish-speaking countries. All of the above goals are necessary for all second language instruction, but this research showed me that they are especially true for heritage learners. These learners do not need to memorize verb charts. Instead, they should delve into the culture, literature and history of places where people speak Spanish.

Second, I will continue to seek ways to differentiate and offer challenge to all learners. Both heritage learners and traditional learners responded that they appreciated the opportunity to challenge themselves. One student wrote, "I think it's cool that you are letting kids choose if they want to be challenged or not." A second student wrote, "I like working outside in the hallway with small groups who really want to learn Spanish. It makes learning fun." I often do not give students enough credit for wanting to learn. The participants of the reading club demonstrated to me that they wanted to push themselves, do more work and learn as much as they could.

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This action research has led me to various questions that I would like to pursue in the future. First, how can I help heritage learners to improve their writing skills and gain confidence with writing in Spanish? The reading club addressed writing. However, there may be other strategies, such as journal writing, which could more systematically help students strengthen this modality. Second, how can I increase reading and writing tasks that utilize technology to better prepare students for the format of standardized testing? Although I teach an elective subject, could I better prepare students for these tests? Third, how can I better balance a differentiated classroom so all students are getting the support they need from me? Elementary teachers are adept at differentiating, but our shorter class periods at the secondary level tend not to lend themselves to it. Could I utilize work stations to help with differentiation? Finally, I would like to investigate other methods to incorporate culture into language learning. Although I already feel that I include cultural instruction, the heritage learner participants responded favorably to the culture embedded in the readings. They showed me that I could do more to make cultural connections with students.

Action research is a powerful tool for teachers. It can show teachers if what they are doing is successful. It can also lead teachers to other questions. This action research study answered my question: In what ways will the use of supplementary reading activities involving cultural topics increase reading proficiency of secondary Spanish heritage learners? The study also helped identify the need in our school's media center to increase literature offerings in Spanish. Finally, the study led me to other questions that I would like to study in the future to better meet the needs of the diverse learners in my classes.

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