The Impact of Reading the Bible and Studying the Bible on Biblical Knowledge

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"Home Run Research" presents new, original research in a digestible, easy-to-understand way, research that has implications for librarians and others interested in literacy development.

There is clear evidence that free voluntary reading is a powerful way of learning. Those who read more do better on tests of history and literature, on tests of cultural literacy, and on tests of science and practical knowledge.[1]

The purpose of this study was to determine whether pleasure reading of the Bible results in significant biblical knowledge and to compare its effects to formal study. Do those who spend more time voluntarily reading the Bible know more about its contents than those who read the Bible less? Such a relationship would be consistent with the results of studies of free voluntary reading. Other factors, however, could also relate to knowledge of the Bible, such as overall education and amount of formal study of the Bible.

In this study, we investigated the impact of voluntary reading of the Bible, comparing its effect to other possible predictors and controlling for some possible confounds.

Procedure

Subjects

Two groups of women and men between the ages of nineteen and sixty-eight served as subjects. All were affiliated with a multidenominational Christian nonprofit service organization. For the first sample, a brief cover letter and questionnaires were e-mailed to approximately one hundred members of the organization. Approximately half were returned, most within a few days time. After eliminating partially completed questionnaires and those with unclear responses, fifty usable surveys remained and were used for the analysis. For the second sample, the questionnaire was administered in a classroom to a group of eighty-nine volunteers for the nonprofit organization while they participated in a summer orientation and training program. Completion of the survey took about ten minutes. Eighty subjects turned in the questionnaires and fifty-two were usable (not eliminated due to partial or missing data). This produced a total of 103 responses. All subjects were informed that completion of the survey was voluntary and anonymous.

Measures

Subjects were asked to take the Bible Character Recognition Test (BCRT). BCRT is a list of twenty-eight names from the Old and New Testaments selected by the first author. An attempt was made to include a range of names, from well-known to less well-known, in order to insure an appropriate level of difficulty.

Subjects were asked to simply indicate if they were familiar with the names. This checklist kind of measure has been validated in a series of studies by Stanovich and colleagues, who reported that checklist measures of authors and book titles correlate consistently and highly with measures of amount of free voluntary reading done, vocabulary knowledge, and, as noted above, general knowledge.[2] The text included such names as Jonathan, Ruth, Philemon, and Claudia.

All names on the test were Bible characters. There were, in other words, no foils. Kim and Krashen reported that performance on an author recognition test without foils was an excellent predictor of cultural literacy.[3]

Subjects were given the following instructions: "Below you will see a list of names. Some of the people on the list are biblical characters (people mentioned in the Bible). Please read the names and put a check mark next to the names of those individuals who you know to be biblical characters. Do not guess, but check only those who you know to be characters from the Bible."

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Subjects also filled out a questionnaire. They were asked their age, number of years they had been a Christian, years of education completed, years of formal Bible training, and the number of years they had studied the Bible on their own. They also answered the following questions:

- Do you enjoy reading the Bible? (1 = not at all; 2 = rarely; 3 = sometimes; 4 = often; 5 = all the time).
- How often do you read the Bible? (1 = never; 2 = once/year; 3 = once/month; 4 = once/week; 5 = every day)

Results

Table 1 shows that subjects were well-educated and had done an average of one-and-a-half years of formal Bible study but considerably more informal study. Subjects reported high enjoyment and frequency of reading the Bible, so much so that there is concern about a possible ceiling effect. The mean score on the BCRT test indicated that the test was of appropriate difficulty for this group.

Table 2 presents correlations of predictors with BCRT scores. Most predictors were significantly correlated with the BCRT, but years of education was barely significant and amount of formal study of the Bible fell just short of statistical significance. (Correlations greater than .20 are statistically significant at the .05 level). Frequency of reading the Bible, enjoyment in reading the Bible, and amount of informal study produced the highest correlations with BCRT performance.

Multiple regression analysis allows one to examine the effect of each predictor independently of the effect of the others, as if the others were held constant. The strength of each predictor is indicated by the beta statistic, which allows a comparison of the relative strengths of each predictor. When, however, variables are highly intercorrelated (termed "multicollinearity"), it is improper to include both in a multiple regression analysis. "Years of being a Christian" was strongly correlated with age (r = .58) and with amount of informal study of the Bible (r = .42), and was thus not used in the multiple regression analysis. "Enjoyment" and "frequency of reading the Bible" were intercorrelated (r = .58). Separate multiple regression analyses were done using the enjoyment and frequency predictors, as both were of interest.

Tables 3 and 4 presents the multiple regression analyses: table 3 includes "enjoyment" as a predictor and table 4 includes "frequency." Frequency of reading the Bible and enjoyment in reading the Bible were clear winners in these analyses. Informal study was the second strongest predictor in both analyses. Age and education were weaker predictors, with years of education not quite reaching statistical significance. Amount of formal study was the least successful predictor and did not come close to statistical significance. The combination of predictors was able to account for about 40 percent of the variability in BCRT scores (r2).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Standard deviation
Years as a Christian	20.90	13.70
Education	16.10	2.00
Formal study	1.51	2.51
Informal study	13.20	11.30
Enjoyment	4.00	0.65
Frequency	4.30	0.69
BCRT	18.20	5.20

Table 2: Correlations with BCRT

Predictor	Correlation
Years as a Christian	0.32
Education	0.21
Formal study	0.18
Informal study	0.49
Frequency	0.44
Enjoyment	0.46
Age	0.31

Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis, Including Enjoyment

Predictor	beta	p-value
Education	0.134	0.1000
Age	0.213	0.0200
Formal study	0.071	0.3800
Informal study	0.249	0.0100
Enjoyment	0.397	0.0001

r2 = .41

Table 4: Multiple Regression Analysis, Including Frequency

Predictor	beta	p-value
Education	0.137	0.1000
Age	0.174	0.0600
Formal study	0.095	0.2500
Informal study	0.284	0.0030
Frequency	0.375	0.0001

r2 = .40

Summary and Conclusions

Voluntary reading of the Bible was a good predictor of biblical knowledge in this study: those who enjoy reading the Bible more, who say they read it more, and who engage in more informal study have superior knowledge of the Bible, as reflected on the BCRT. Formal study of the Bible failed as a predictor of knowledge of the Bible.

The strong impact of frequency and enjoyment of reading the Bible are especially impressive when one considers the obvious ceiling effects present in this study: The means for these variables were approximately four out of five, suggesting that the subjects in both studies were in general dedicated and enthusiastic readers of the Bible. With a wider spread of scores, one would expect an even stronger relationship between frequency of Bible reading and knowledge of the Bible.

Our results, overwhelmingly in favor of voluntary reading and informal study, may be due to motivation or the fact that those who study on their own are more able to pursue special interests. Additional research should also examine the nature of formal Bible study. If additional research confirms these results, the implications are clear: Motivating interest and self-study in the Bible is an effective means of increasing biblical knowledge, and forced study is not. ●

References

1. Diane Ravitch and Chester Finn, *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1993); Richard West and Keith Stanovich, "The Incidental Acquisition of Information from Reading," *Psychological Science* 2 (1991): 325–30; Keith Stanovich and Anne Cunningham, "Where Does Knowledge Come From: Specific Associations Between Print Exposure and Informational Acquisition," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 85, no. 2 (1993): 211–29.
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