

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

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Abstract: In a study of Christian adults, frequency of voluntary bible reading was a significant predictor of recognition of biblical names; amount of formal bible study was not a significant predictor.

INTRODUCTION

Free voluntary reading is a powerful way of learning. Those who read more do better on tests of history, literature, "cultural literacy," science, and "practical knowledge,"¹ This study attempts to determine whether reading the bible for pleasure results in increased knowledge of the bible, and to compare its effects to formal bible study.

PROCEDURE

Subjects. Subjects were women and men between 19 and 68 years old affiliated with a multi-denominational Christian non-profit service organization. One hundred received a brief cover letter and questionnaires (see below). Approximately half were returned, most within a few days time. After eliminating partially completed questionnaires and those with unclear responses 50 usable surveys remained and were used for the analysis. Other subjects (n = 89) filled out the questionnaire in a classroom, while they participated in a summer orientation and training program. Eighty subjects turned in the questionnaires and 52 were usable (i.e. not eliminated due to partial or missing data).

Subjects were informed that completion of the survey was voluntary and anonymous. In fact, subjects were asked not to include their names. Completion of the survey took about ten minutes.

Measures. Subjects were asked to take the Bible Character Recognition Test (BCRT). The BCRT was a list of 28 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 BCRT included names such as: Jonathan, Ruth, Philemon, and Claudia. All names on the BCRT 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."

Subjects were also 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

As a group, subjects were well-educated (mean of 21 years of schooling), had done an average of 1.5 years of formal bible study, and reported 13.2 years of informal study (standard deviation = 11.3). Subjects reported high enjoyment of (4 on a scale of 1-5) and frequency (4.3 out of 5) of reading the bible, so much so that there is concern about a possible ceiling effect. The mean score on the BCRT test (18.2, $sd = 5.2$) indicated that the test was of appropriate difficulty for this group.

Frequency of reading the bible correlated strongly with scores on the BCRT ($r = .44$), as did informal study ($r = .49$) and enjoyment ($r = .46$). Years of being a Christian ($r = .32$), age ($r = .31$), and education ($r = .21$) were also significant predictors, but correlations were lower. The correlations of years of formal study and BCRT scores was positive ($r = .18$) but was the weakest, and fell just short of statistical significance.

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 informal study ($r = .42$) and was thus not used in the analysis. "Enjoyment" and "frequency" were also highly correlated ($r = .58$). Because both of these variables were of great interest, separate analyses were done using each.

Table 1: Multiple Regression Analysis

predictor	beta	p-value	beta	p-value
education	0.134	0.1	0.137	0.1
age	0.213	0.02	0.174	0.06
formal study	0.071	0.38	0.095	0.25
informal study	0.249	0.01	0.284	0.003
enjoyment	0.397	0.001		
frequency			0.375	0.001

Table 1 contains both analyses. Informal study, enjoyment and frequency of reading were clear winners, with the highest betas. Age and education were weaker predictors. Amount of formal study was the least successful and did not come close to statistical significance. The combination of predictors accounted for about 40% of the variability of BCRT scores in both analysis (r squared).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The results confirm that those who read the bible more on their own, and enjoy it more, know more about it. Formal study of the bible failed as a predictor of knowledge of the bible as measured by the BCRT. Recall that mean scores for enjoyment and frequency were very high: It is possible that with a wider range of scores, an even stronger relationship with bible knowledge might emerge.

Our study clearly confirms the power of self-motivated reading. But before we conclude that formal study is a waste of time, we should take a closer look at the nature of formal study.

REFERENCES

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