

INTEGRATED READING LITERACY INTERVENTIONS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS AND CLASSROOM PRACTICES OF INSERVICE TEACHERS OF HIGH SCHOOL BUSINESS

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to contribute an understanding of integrated reading literacy interventions in business course phenomena via the review, analysis, synthesis and detail of data. **Method:** The qualitative research method was utilized in the study via the focus group tool to explore the phenomenon. The data were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded to determine findings. **Results:** Findings of the study seem to confer with previous research findings, in regards to defining characteristics. Although, it emerged that participants often selected lower level integrated reading literacy interventions that focused on phonemic awareness, in lieu of more complex interventions for improving learners' reading comprehension, in lieu of the fact the participants were primarily practicing in high school settings. Learners in high school settings are more likely to struggle with comprehension than phonemic awareness. Further, participants indicated little agreement on the frequency for utilizing integrated reading literacy comprehension strategies in high school business courses.

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Introduction

The act of integrating academic content into business courses received initial policy attention with the passage of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act (1984). The Act explicitly indicated that coursework defined as vocational, at the time, and now defined as career and technical, should occur with the integration of academic content (i.e. reading and math). However, the act did little to define the characteristics or suggest models to carry out the task (Johnson, Charner & White, 2003). Two decades later, the National Assessment of Vocational Education (2004) indicated that career and technical education (hereafter referred to as CTE) courses had no significant impact on student academic achievement. The 2006 reauthorization of the Carl D. Perkins Act responded by strengthening the call for integrated academics with the addition of an accountability measure that tied future federal funding to the results of the standardized academic assessments required by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002).

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The accountability allowed CTE researchers to narrow their agenda to focus on the integration of reading and mathematics, as those were the two areas assessed by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002). Stone, Alfeld, Pearson, Lewis and Jensen (2006) reported that although the body of literature that investigated integrated academic content in CTE courses had grown, further research continued to be complicated by several factors. Three of those influential factors were the definition of integration was ambiguous, integrated instructional interventions were under researched, and CTE teachers were underprepared to implement strategic academic integration models for the teaching of reading and mathematics. The DPE Research Project Committee (2009) continued this call by identifying integrated reading strategies as an area which needed additional research. In this study, we focus on the integration of reading in the context of teaching for and about business.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative study was to contribute to an understanding of integrated reading literacy interventions in business course phenomena via the authors review, analysis, synthesis and detail of the qualitative research method and procedure implemented in the collection of that data. As a result, knowledge is added to the body of literature that enhances the description, defining characteristics and practices of high school-level (grades 6-12) teachers for the integration of content for and about business with reading skills and knowledge.

The study sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What do teachers of high school-level business courses perceive to be the defining characteristics of integration, literacy and interventions?
2. What integrated reading literacy interventions have teachers implemented in the teaching of high school-level business courses and how often are they implemented?

The clarification of the defining characteristics and strategic interventions practiced by teachers of high school business courses will assist researchers by reducing the ambiguity of the definition of integration so as to clarify models for the integration of reading skills and knowledge in the context of business courses. Further, the study assists in the preparation of teachers for the implementation of strategic integrated instructional models by identifying the characteristics of instructional interventions being practiced by inservice teachers of business by allowing teachers to connect their practice to theoretical methods and models (Gove, 1983).

Review of Literature

Few valid and reliable scientific studies documented the effect of integrated reading literacy interventions on student academic achievement (National

Assessment of Vocational Education, 2004). Two factors influenced the paucity of literature, both ambiguity in description and lack of previous research (Johnson, Charner, & White, 2003; Stone, Alfeld, Pearson, & Lewis, 2006). Nonetheless, federal policymakers clearly indicated that literacy skills should be integrated in business courses and that student academic achievement must improve (Carl D. Perkins CTE Improvement Act, 2006).

It was clear that student achievement was directly correlated to the effective delivery of instructional content. Darling-Hammond, Bransford, LePage, Hammerness, & Duffey (2005) indicated that the conceptual framework for effective instruction was grounded in teacher content knowledge, awareness of the context for instruction, and implementation of instructional interventions. The application of the conceptual framework to this study revealed that business teachers were prepared to teach for and about business; however, business teachers reported that they needed enhanced methodological training for the selection and implementation of integrated reading literacy interventions (Polkinghorne, 2006).

Draper (2008) revealed that the selection and implementation was complex because course content strongly influenced the types of interventions utilized in the teaching of reading skills and knowledge. Thus, teachers of business should select strategies based on the objectives of the business content lesson being delivered and consider the purpose (phonemic, vocabulary acquisition, and/or comprehension) for the implementation of strategic reading interventions in their content delivery.

Biancarosa and Snow (2002) reported concern with the ability of non-reading teachers to select and implement specific instructional interventions with purpose. Jacobs (1990) on the other hand had reported that business teachers had historically selected some of the best documented interventions for teaching reading skills. It emerged then that while teachers had selected some of the best documented strategies for teaching reading in business courses, their strategic intervention selection might have occurred without purpose or by mere incident.

It was clear that when teachers of business purposefully selected specific integrated reading literacy interventions their students experienced positive growth in their reading literacy achievement (Stone, et al, 2006). Thus, this study sought to enhance the description of implemented reading literacy interventions in the context of teaching for and about business through the review, analysis, and synthesis of the perceptions of inservice teachers in regards to the defining characteristics, selection, and implementation of integrated reading literacy interventions in the context of teaching for and about business at the high school level.

Methodology

The qualitative research method was utilized in this study. Qualitative methodology is often deployed when rich description of under investigated phenomena is needed (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998). Thus, the research methodology

allowed for the enhanced description of integrated reading literacy interventions in the context of business courses for this study.

Focus groups were selected as the qualitative research tool, because we wanted to avoid the halo effect. Morgan and Krueger (1993) revealed that the tool would encourage participants to honestly describe their perceptions and practices in a secure and supportive environment. Participants responded to a semi-structured interview protocol.

The semi-structured interview protocol was developed based on a thorough review of literature and designed to elicit data in regards to the conceptual framework for the teaching of reading, which called for explicit teaching, purposeful selection of interventions, and the active engagement of students with written and/or symbolic material (National Reading Panel, 2000). The interview protocol was reviewed and approved by the researcher's institutional review board. The interview questions were constructed by the researchers to determine the study participants' definition of integration, literacy, and interventions. The remaining questions were designed to focus on integrated reading literacy interventions. Finally, the questions were piloted tested by two veteran business teacher educators. The business teacher educators indicated the interview questions were valid to answer the questions under investigation in the study.

The focus groups were posed a series of questions. The participants in the focus groups were allowed to respond to the questions until they reached consensus and/or indicated they had adequately answered each question (in this study about 90 minutes). The participants were asked to respond to the following questions, of which the first three were utilized to frame the study:

1. What do you perceive to be the definition of integration in the context of business courses?
2. What do you perceive to be the definition of literacy in the context of business courses?
3. What do you perceive to be the definition of intervention in the context of business courses?
4. Do you perceive that literacy interventions should be implemented in business courses?
5. How frequently should literacy interventions be implemented in business courses?
6. What literacy interventions are you implementing in your classroom?
7. How do you utilize those interventions in your classroom?
8. Do you perceive that you have adequate preparation to select and implement literacy interventions in the teaching of business?

The participants were ten teachers that were currently teaching business content in a Midwestern state. The participants were selected based on demographic data, so that the participants would represent urban, suburban, and rural geographic locations. They taught traditional business courses and computer technology

courses. In addition, the participants were described as beginning (0-5 years), middle-career (6-10 years), and veteran teachers (10 or more years of teaching experience). Participants included both male and female business teachers.

The participants were divided into two near-salient demographic groups of five, Table 1.

Table 1
Focus Group Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2
Career Stage		
Beginning	2	2
Middle	1	1
Veteran	1	1
Gender		
Female	4	4
Male	1	1
Geographic Setting		
Urban	3	3
Suburban	1	1
Rural	1	1
School Poverty Level		
Title 1	4	4
Non-Title 1	1	1

The groups were simultaneously facilitated in separate rooms by two researchers. The interviews were conducted in-person and facilitated in separate rooms by two trained researchers, who precisely followed the interview protocol.

The data were recorded on audio tape and transcribed. The transcribed data were analyzed by the researchers to determine appropriate themes. To establish inter-coder reliability, both researchers initially reviewed the transcripts and established the themes which emerged from the study (aligning with the study's conceptual framework) and then proceeded to analyze the data. Data analyses were compared to establish inter-coder reliability. The use of two researchers in the data analysis enhanced the validity (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998). The themes then were matched with the conceptual framework for the study (teacher content knowledge, awareness of the context for instruction, and implementation of instructional interventions). Finally, the data were coded to assist in data categorization. Data codes were determined based on the review of literature, specifically when analyzing implemented interventions, codes were developed to include phonemic, vocabulary acquisition, and reading comprehension.

Findings

The findings in this study are headed by the research questions under investigation. The answer to each question is presented by compiling participants' statements, synthesizing the data, and at times includes exact participant(s) statements (shown in italics) to assist in clarification.

Research Question 1: What do teachers of high school-level business courses perceive to be the defining characteristics of integration, literacy and interventions?

Participants indicated that integration was characterized by bringing, combining, or adding content-knowledge like MLA format, APA format, the mathematical order of operations (included as a result of the order of interview questions, the study had not yet focused on reading literacy), and/or constructing complete sentences into business content such as the teaching of keyboarding, computer technology, and consumer economics. Integration might also be characterized by bringing, combining, or adding content-skills like addition and/or skills needed to write a multi-page paper.

Integration of knowledge or skills went beyond what might normally occur in a course. Participants were clear that integration required a purposeful effort and did not emerge from the normal act of teaching for and about business. In fact, participants clarified this finding as integration is more than *writing a normal paper*. Integrated content requires that material from outside the business content-areas be brought into or embedded within the teaching of business content through instructor cooperation, *clarified as sharing groups of kids between instructors and/or constructing common lesson*, and/or by the primary teacher.

Literacy was characterized by the ability to learn workplace and/or academic standards of performance that focus on the ability to communicate by writing or speaking. Standards were focused on the ability to identify and comprehend the application of terminology and/or skills into a context, summarizing read material, following directions, and/or understanding content-area knowledge and skills. Literacy was described as the ability to understand information by phonemically (*sounding out*), reading, or listening for comprehension.

Participants indicated that an intervention was characterized as the addition of instructional tools/aides (*additional people, computer software/equipment, and textbooks matched to student reading skill-level*). Interventions included format modifications such as reading written directions, writing spoken directions (*noting*), providing additional time (*like tutorial sessions and/or extended due dates*) and/or the selection of specific teaching methods/strategies to the normal act of teaching.

Research Question 2: What integrated reading literacy interventions have teachers implemented in the teaching of high school-level business courses and how often are they implemented?

Based on a review of literature it was determined that the participants implemented strategies for teaching phonemic awareness, vocabulary acquisition, and reading comprehension. Data were themed to match those three primary

methods of teaching reading skills and knowledge. They had difficulty identifying specific interventions, in fact one indicated and the other participants agreed in one focus group that *there are probably a lot of things that we do on a daily basis that we don't even think of that would be referred to as a literacy intervention.*

The participants indicated they primarily implemented three interventions to improve student phonemic awareness skills, namely the use of a *different book, reading text to students, and reading selected passages of a text to the whole class.*

The study participants indicated five primary ways in which they had attempted to improve the vocabulary acquisition reading skills of students. The interventions included *bell assignment[s]* and providing students an authentic experience, so that the students would have the opportunity to expand prior knowledge, as well as *sustained silent reading, tutorial time, and implementing writing assignments that required the use of specific vocabulary words.*

The majority of reading literacy interventions discussed by participants focused on student reading comprehension skills. The interventions included *answering questions after reading, emphasis on specific words, sentence completion activities, making inferences, looking at a picture of something before reading about it, summarizing, talking about a topic first and then making students answer questions, and asking students to read a paragraph one sentence at-a-time.*

Participants in the study did not reach consensus on the frequency for reading literacy learning interventions in business courses. The primary barrier to consensus was the perception of the difficulty in utilizing integrated reading literacy interventions. In fact, participants indicated that integrated reading literacy learning interventions were *difficult* and that interventions should only be utilized *when needed* and/or *when there is an opportunity.* Other participants indicated that interventions should be used *every day* and/or *always.* Finally, some participants indicated that interventions should be utilized based on each independent *student's level of need.*

Discussion and Recommendations

Discussion

The focus groups were indeed small; however, the size of the groups was appropriate for exploratory qualitative research. Caution is advised that the findings and discussion in this manuscript should not be generalized to a larger population, without additional study. However, the findings in this study suggest business teachers believe that integration required bringing content together and enhancing student knowledge by implementing interventions that go beyond what might normally occur in the delivery of business content. In terms of literacy, the participants strongly indicated that literacy has a multi-faceted definition that could include numerical, written, technology, or reading skill development. This finding is consistent with the literature basis (Johnson, Charner, & White, 2003).

Intervention is a relatively new term to be implemented in the education field, although it had previously been identified with the phrase instructional strategy. The participants indicated they were familiar with the term and described the phenomena as the selection of tools and/or strategies that should be purposefully selected to improve specific needs of the learner. That finding is consistent with the literature basis. However, there was indication that participants had not reached consensus on whether those interventions should be implemented explicitly or implicitly. The literature basis is clear that interventions should be selected purposefully and implemented explicitly; as a result the findings were inconsistent with previous literature.

When the study was aligned to specifically focus on integrated reading literacy interventions, the findings became less aligned with previous research. Participants in this study indicated they were utilizing several best methods of teaching reading skills and knowledge; although they had difficulty identifying specific strategies, in fact they only precisely provided one empirically supported strategy, Sustained Silent Reading. In addition the findings indicate that business teachers were primarily able to identify strategies focused on phonemic awareness, an area that is typically aligned with the needs of emergent readers, a demographic that is more prevalent at early grade levels than at the high school level, the primary area of expertise and practice of the study participants.

In terms of phonemic awareness instruction, the findings of Jacobs (1990) were confirmed as business teachers were utilizing some of the best documented strategies for improving student reading skills. However, the findings also support Biancarosa and Snow (2002) who indicated that non-reading teachers lack the ability to specifically select interventions based on student need, in fact the findings suggest difficulty of the participants to identify strategies associated with reading comprehension, the primary area of difficulty for high school level students.

Finally, the apparent disagreement on frequency for integrated reading literacy interventions seem to suggest that business teachers do need additional training to select and implement interventions, a finding that supports the research of Polkinghorne (2006), which revealed that business teachers overwhelming desired additional professional development in the area of integrated reading literacy interventions.

Recommendations

The primary recommendation of this study for further research is to provide future participants with clear definitions and characteristics associated with integrated reading literacy interventions, as the terms in and of themselves have a variety of interpretations. This should assist in reducing the risk of error in future studies. Further, the development of a quantitative study based on the findings of this study would allow for additional validation of findings. In addition, a study examining a large population may render findings that are generalizable, as the findings of the qualitative study are not generalizable to a larger population.

The recommendations for practice clearly emerged in this study. Business teachers support the development of student reading skills and knowledge. They are implementing integrated reading literacy skills interventions in their practice. However, the interventions implemented do not support the primary reading literacy skill and knowledge needed of high school students; as a result their efforts may be misguided. It is strongly recommended that subject-matter experts in the area of integrated reading literacy skill interventions in the context of business courses provide additional professional development opportunities to inservice teachers and implement strategic coursework designed to improve pre-service business teachers' knowledge and skills in the area of integrated reading skills interventions. These recommendations confer with those suggested by Draper (2008) and Polkinghorne (2006).

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