

# Utilizing Culturally Relevant Texts in the English Language Arts Classroom

Savannah Heabler

**Abstract:** Maintaining students' engagement and assessing their reading comprehension is very challenging. Today, students have a difficult time connecting what they learn in class with their daily lives based on the texts that have been commonly used for years in the classroom. English language arts teachers introduce students to characters that they believe their students will relate to, however, every student comes from different cultural, socioeconomic, and diverse backgrounds that need to be taken into account when choosing texts to read in class. This paper explains why culturally relevant texts are important for English language arts teachers to incorporate into their classrooms to help students remain engaged and strengthen their reading comprehension.

## Introduction

Students today have a difficult time staying engaged and motivated in the classroom and that stems, at least in part, from them being exposed to content or literature that does not interest them. Teachers have a certain amount of time in the school year to assess students' ability to read well and understand the components of a story or texts in order to make connections. Therefore, it is important for teachers to get to know their students on a personal level in order to choose the texts explored throughout the school year that will effectively impact students' academic and personal lives. Oftentimes, teachers choose texts that are commonly taught year after year; however, research has shown that when students are introduced to texts that are relevant to them, their ability to comprehend the text and remain engaged increases. So, how can we as English language arts educators create more engagement and motivation in the classroom to increase students' reading comprehension and ability to make deeper connections with texts?

## Culturally Relevant Texts

Diversity and culture are two important components that need to be incorporated into an English language arts classroom by increasing the number of culturally relevant texts. What exactly makes a text culturally relevant? Culturally relevant texts consist of characters, events and experiences from the passages and selections found throughout the past material to find a resemblance or similarity with the students' own present perspective and those of the future. For example, researcher Alma Rodriguez's (2009) work on connecting Hispanic students to school curriculum, identifies a text as culturally relevant when, "there are similarities between the characters and students with their families, and when there are relationships between the students' experiences and those told in the stories" (p. 14). She also looked at the reasons and benefits of incorporating culturally relevant texts into the curriculum to enhance English Language Learners' comprehension. She was able to conclude that

culturally relevant texts allowed students in the classroom to develop their critical literacy skills by activating their prior knowledge to help make sense of the material and generate deeper level questions on the ideas represented in the text (p. 15).

These culturally relevant texts work alongside culturally relevant pedagogy in the English language arts classroom. Culturally relevant pedagogy is defined by Gloria Ladson Billings (1995) as a “theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspective that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (p. 469). This would suggest that teachers in English language arts classrooms need to take into account their students’ cultural identity while choosing texts to use in the classroom that will ultimately increase their ability to relate to the text on a personal level which in turn will enhance their comprehension, engagement and motivation in the classroom.

### ***Cultural Relevant Texts and Reading Comprehension***

Culturally relevant texts give students the opportunity to “see” themselves in literature which creates a spark of interest. Along with sparking interest in students, research has shown that culturally relevant texts improve students’ reading comprehension. How exactly do these texts increase students’ comprehension? A study done by researchers Amy Clark and Jane Fleming (2019) found that reading and discussing culturally relevant texts with children from nondominant social backgrounds activated childrens’ experiential knowledge that promoted increased reading comprehension development. During their study, they documented and observed 13 preschool to third-grade teachers from four large urban school districts with students from different sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds. Each teacher was required to use culturally relevant texts in their English Language Arts classrooms that spoke directly to the everyday experiences of their students to assess their reading comprehension development. Teachers that participated in the study found that students were able to connect their personal lives to the story which enhanced their comprehension. For example, one teacher in the study, Ms. Carter, read aloud the book *Something Beautiful* (Wyeth, 1998) after which she suggested that “the text and discussion affirmed the children’s lived experiences and engaged them cognitively in drawing inferences and making personal connections to a key theme of the text” (Clark & Fleming, 2019, p. 35). This observation and conclusion from Ms. Carter showed that when students draw on their cultural and experiential background knowledge to make sense of a text, their ability to comprehend greatly improves.

Another prime example of how culturally relevant texts can impact students’ reading comprehension comes from a study done by researcher, Ann Ebe (2010). She studied how culturally relevant texts improved English Language Learners’ ability to read proficiently and make connections to two different texts. The first story used in the study was, *Kwan the Artist* (Various, 2022), which is about a young boy that just moved to the United States and has a hard time understanding and interpreting his teacher. He strives to do well in school despite the prevalent language barrier between him, his teacher and his peers. This particular story was used as the cultural relevant story in the research study. The second story used in the research

study was not a culturally relevant piece of text but was a traditional tale about deciphering who is strong; the wind or the sun.

Throughout the study, nine students were asked to read both stories and then retell each story using a cultural relevance rubric created by researcher Ebe (2010). The rubric asked students to rank each story on a scale of 1 to 4 (1 being not culturally relevant and 4 being very culturally relevant). The rubric used to identify the facts of cultural relevancy for each story consisted of eight categories; the ethnicity of characters, setting, the year the story takes place, ages of characters, gender of the characters, the language or dialect used in the story, the genre of the story, and the readers' prior experiences and background knowledge. Ebe (2010) found that the culturally relevant text, *Kwan the Artist* (Various, 2002) scored higher in cultural relevancy with a mean score of 26.9 compared to the text, *The Wind and the Sun* (dePaola, 1995) with a mean score of 14.2. At the conclusion of the study, Ebe (2010) revealed that when students read *Kwan the Artist* (Various, 2002), they had a better understanding of the text and they remembered more and were able to recall information from the story in order to accurately retell the story when prompted (Ebe, 2010, p. 208). On the other hand, the text *The Wind and the Sun* (dePaola, 1995), revealed that students had a more difficult time retelling the story due to having to sound out unknown words and not having as much prior knowledge and background of the topic or content (Ebe, 2010). The interesting observation in this study was the miscue analysis and retelling data Ebe (2010) tracked which suggested that the students' reading comprehension was greater when reading a story they identified as being more culturally relevant. Therefore, these two studies provide insight and information that demonstrates that culturally relevant texts help aid students' reading comprehension by making it easier to formulate connections and recall information from the text based on their prior experiences and knowledge.

## Culturally Relevant Texts and Engagement

When discussing motivation and academic achievement, the two concepts go hand in hand in the classroom. Without motivation, students have a difficult time becoming high achieving individuals which in turn creates a disparity in our world. Motivation is identified as an individual's ability to remain focused and driven in order to attain a goal or incentive. It is the goal of an English language arts educator to keep their students motivated in the classroom by fostering meaningful discussions and utilizing various interests to their advantage. In the research study implemented by Rodriguez (2009), one of the themes revealed was motivation. Rodriguez (2009) reported that, "participants mentioned through culturally relevant books, ELLs [English language learners] would want to 'read more' and to 'produce good work'" (p. 19). This observation shows that students are more willing to read and develop meaningful connections when they are exposed to culturally relevant texts that are directly related to some aspect of their lives and cultures.

Along with motivation, students need to be fully engaged with a text in order to create meaning and understand the text at a higher level. Student engagement can be described as a student's innate ability to be curious, optimistic, passionate and interested when learning and processing information in order to internalize that information into their lives. "Culturally relevant texts have increased student interest,

reading engagement and achievement scores with various significance levels as compared to other required reading texts” (Ebe, 2011; Marshall, 2011; Scullini, 2014 as noted in Tan & Estacio, 2021, p. 344). Culturally relevant texts allow students to develop their critical thinking skills by initiating the natural curiosity and interest they already have about the text to make meaning and connections to their own lives.

Tan and Estacio (2021) conducted a study on the level of engagement of high school students with culturally relevant texts. The study consisted of eight tenth grade students at a private school in the Philippines. The eight participants included seven boys and one girl, all students from different cultural backgrounds. These students were required to work in a small group together and read five texts that were familiar and relevant to their lives such as having characters in the texts the same or near the age of the students, similar language and interactions between peers and family, and familiar experiences. Tan and Estacio (2021) used researcher Ann Ebe’s (2011) cultural relevance rubric to assess students’ ranking of each text’s cultural relevance. While students were in literature circles and had individual roles, they all participated in meaningful and critical thinking discussions about each text. Students were asked to answer journal prompts each night for homework which consisted of questions that pertained to their evaluation of cultural relevancy of each text, the level of discussion in their literature circles and one that required them to offer their opinion based on what they learned from the text. After the eight participants filled out a total of five cultural relevance rubrics, one after each story was read, the text that was deemed the highest in cultural relevancy was “The Summer of My 17th Year” (Santos, 1942) with a score of 20 points out of 32 (Tan & Estacio, 2021, p. 350). Tan and Estacio (2021) explained the significance and reason behind students’ high rating of the text by saying:

...one factor that caused “Summer” to have the highest rating among the reading texts was that participants’ current city of residence at the time was directly mentioned in the story. Aside from this, the biggest factor that helped boost cultural relevance was the theme of teen romance, which was very relevant to readers at their current age (p. 350).

The other four texts also received high rating in cultural relevancy, but students reported that the words included in the texts were not in their same manner of talking on a daily basis and that the experiences or interactions between parents were unfamiliar and foreign to them. For example, students reported that the text *Duffy’s Jacket* (Coville, 2014) was an enjoyable story; however, they expressed that their parents would never leave them alone with a younger sibling in a strange place, like the characters had in the story. It was found that all eight participants enjoyed reading each text, despite them reporting that not every text was perfectly rated as culturally relevant to them.

In the study, both researchers concluded that “...the level of relevance found in the texts was still significantly higher than the current reading texts required in the curriculum of the school where the participants study, which were mostly from the early 1900s. This resulted in an unprecedented level of focus observed by the researchers from the participants during independent reading and self-stimulated engagement in text discussion which are always desirable results for teacher of English and reading in general” (Tan & Estacio, 2021, p. 359). This study demonstrates

that culturally relevant texts impact students' ability to remain engaged by activating their curiosity and interest which in turn strengthens their capability of discussion and comprehension of the text.

## Conclusion

Exposing students to culturally relevant texts is important for teachers to incorporate into their English language arts classrooms to become more aware of their student's cultural heritages and bridge the gap between home and school experiences. In order to strengthen and maintain students' ability to comprehend texts and be engaged and motivated to learn, it is crucial for educators to source what they know about their students' personal and academic backgrounds and use that to increase students' ability to learn in meaningful, relatable and effective ways. By doing this, teachers can create a cultural awareness environment that celebrates their students' learning and individual backgrounds at the same time.

## References

- Clark, A., & Fleming, J. (2019). "They almost become the teacher": Pre-K to third grade teachers' experiences reading and discussing culturally relevant texts with their students. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 58(3), 23-30.
- Coville, B. (2014). *Duffy's jacket*. Bruce Coville.
- dePaola, T. (1995). *The wind and the sun*. Silver Burdett Press.
- Ebe, A. E. (2010). Culturally relevant texts and reading assessment for English language learners. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 50(3), 193-210.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995b). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 465-491. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312032003465>
- Rodríguez, A. D. (2009). Culturally relevant books: Connecting Hispanic students to the curriculum. *Gist: Education and Learning Research Journal*, 3, 11-29.
- Santos, H. O. (1942). *The summer of my 17th year*. Dodd Mead, Simon & Shuster.
- Tan, D.N., & Mante-Estacio, M.J. (2021). Reader-text connection: Reporting the engagement of high school students with culturally relevant texts. *TEFLIN Journal- A Publication on the Teaching and Learning of English*, 32(2), 342-359. <https://doi.org/10.15639/teflinjournal.v32i2/342>
- Various (2002). *Kwan the Artist*. Rigby Reading.
- Wyeth, S. D. (1998). *Something beautiful*. Double Day Books for Young Readers.



### About the Author

Savannah Heabler received her B.A. in Visual Communications from Ohio University and her master's degree in middle childhood education from the University of Toledo. She will be an 8th grade ELA and Social Studies teacher in the Toledo Public School district starting in August 2022.