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## **Allocation of time in reading**

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### **ABSTRACT**

How teachers allocated instructional time in reading classes served as the focus of this study. Twenty teachers were observed during reading sessions to answer two research questions. For question 1, how do teachers allocate time, observations indicated that teachers used class time in the following increments: reading and responding 35.47%; listening and discussing 24.89%; waiting 8.36%; completing skill development activities 20.28%; telling, writing, and narrating 7.52%; and devoting 3.47% of the remaining instructional time to other activities. Question 2, does time allocated for reading coordinated text exceed more than 50% of the total time designated for reading instruction, answer appeared to be "no." Teachers observed in this study allocated only 35% of instructional time for children to read and respond to concentrated amounts of coordinated text. Recommended time allocations that stated that time reading should exceed the time allocated to all other reading class activities was not observed.

There is an adage that equates proficiency with practice; e.g., before one can become truly proficient doing something, one must perform the desired behavior or action until that activity is done automatically

and without much conscious thought and attention. Assuming this adage is true, then it may be expected that the more time learners spend in the active process of reading, the more proficient they will become in their growth and acquisition of reading ability.

The amount of time pupils spend actually reading in primary level reading classes is quite small according to a documented report by Anderson et al., (1985). Children typically spend less than 10% (7 to 8 minutes) of reading class time actually reading text while they may spend up to 70% of time practicing or extending through "seatwork." These "seatwork" activities that dominate lessons, further contend Anderson et al., (1985), do not foster literacy; nor, does this "seatwork" time usually require any extended writing.

Fielding and Pearson (1994), in a significant review of reading research designed for administrators, suggested that time in instruction was the critical factor in reading program success. "We contend that a successful program... [should include]... large amounts of time for actual text reading" (p. 62). While these authors did not indicate the amount of instructional time that was most likely to lead to successful instruction, they did conclude "At present research offers no answers..., (but) students should have more time to read than the combined total allocated for learning about reading and talking or writing about what has been read" (p. 63).

In a synergistic algorithm designed to convey the idea that reading is greater than the sum of its activities, Blair (1995) suggested the following equation:  $A > B + C$ . In Blair's equation  $A$ =reading,  $B$ =skill instruction, and  $C$ =discussion and extension of text. Blair contended that in properly balanced reading instruction, children should spend more time reading coordinated text than they should spend time practicing or extending reading skills. Blair followed his recommendation with a limited observational report of actual reading practices in Florida primary classrooms. His observations of Florida classrooms suggested that his hypothesized distribution for successful instruction was not found in either the traditional or whole language environments. In fact, reading coordinated text accounted for approximately 36% of classroom instructional time while skill instruction and discussion or follow-up about what had been read accounted for 48% and 15% of reading instruction time, respectively.

When queried by McNinch, et al. (1996) as to how much time should be dedicated to different instructional activities in a reading session, elementary school teachers from three states reported through a survey the following ideal allocations. Primary level teachers reported

that pupils should read coordinated text from 33% to 58% of a typical lesson. During the lesson, pupils should discuss and react from 16% to 33% of time devoted to a typical lesson. Teachers reported that their pupils should write, narrate, and retell from 8% to 33% of a typical one hour reading lesson.

Teachers from the McNinch, et al. (1996) report appeared to support and give theoretical agreement to the instructional recommendation of Blair (1995) and Fielding and Pearson, (1994) that time reading coordinated text should exceed instructional time practicing or extending reading skills. However, it is not clear if teachers' perceptions of the ideal amount of time necessary for each instructional activity are actually translated into classroom practice. How much time do teachers allocate to different instructional routines in reading sessions?

### *Question*

If there is instructional value in the notion that time allocated to direct reading of coordinated text should exceed time spent practicing or extending reading skills, (1) then how do teachers actually allocate time to these areas during instruction, and (2) does time allocated for reading coordinated text exceed more than 50% of the total time designated for reading instruction?

## METHODOLOGY

### *Sample*

Twenty elementary school classrooms (eleven 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, four 4<sup>th</sup> grade, and five 5<sup>th</sup> grade) engaged in reading instruction were used as the sample in this study. The classrooms under observation were in Georgia, Mississippi, and North Carolina. The schools in the study would be described as representing suburban and small town environments adjacent to metropolitan areas. The cooperating teachers were all volunteers who consented to be observed after hearing a request to assist in reading research aimed at improving the delivery of reading instruction. Specifics of the study, e.g., what was to be observed, were not revealed. All of the teachers were female and would be described as experienced teachers. Their teaching tenures ranged from a low of 3 years to over 10 years. Average teaching longevity for the sample was approximately 7 years. Sixteen of the teachers held or were currently pursuing advanced degrees in education.

*Procedures*

The focus of the study attempted to determine the amount of time that teachers devoted to the different areas of classroom reading instruction. The amount of reading class time that the teachers allowed for each area of reading was determined by collecting data through direct observation of classes by the researchers involved in the study. The observers entered the classrooms prior to the onset of the instruction to be observed and recorded observations of the reading activity taking place at one minute intervals (see Figure 1). Observation protocols were coded minute-by-minute to profile the teacher and related pupil activity actually occurring in the observed reading sequence. The researchers coded pupil behavior prompted by teacher direction or instruction as belonging to one of six categories. After teachers' directions or prompts, the pupils' behaviors were coded as follows:

1. Reading and responding;
2. Listening and discussing;
3. Waiting;
4. Completing skill development activities;
5. Telling, writing, narrating;
6. Other.

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*Figure 1.* Sample Observational Record Sheet

Minute-by-minute intervals

	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>67</u>	<u>68</u>	<u>69</u>
Read/respond	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Listen/discuss	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Wait	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Skill Dev.	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Tell/write/ Narrate	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Other	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

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In order to create the time variable for the study, session lengths were recorded by use of a stopwatch. Percentage scores were then computed by dividing the observed time of each of the six instructional categories by the total time of the classroom observation. Six scores represented the allocation of time in reading.

To ensure consistency among the researchers' evaluations and classifications, several practice classroom reading sessions were videotaped, observed, and jointly scored. This preliminary activity did not involve any teacher who would later be observed as a volunteer in the study. This instructional training activity for the researchers was repeated until there was agreement in evaluating and marking teacher behavior. When classrooms were observed, it was assumed that this agreement was still present and observations were recorded consistently across the researchers.

All the cooperating, volunteer teachers gave advanced permission to be observed and selected the time and date of observation. No teacher was observed by a "surprise" visit. Teachers were asked to present a typical reading lesson that presented their usual classroom activities. For the sake of uniformity, teachers were asked to prepare lessons that would last approximately 60 minutes. Accordingly, observations lasted from a short lesson of only 32 minutes to a long lesson of 67 minutes. The average lesson length was 51.4 minutes long.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The amount of classroom time devoted to reading coordinated text was investigated by the first research question. Specifically, the study asked in Question 1, how do teachers actually allocate time to different instructional routines (reading and responding; listening and discussing; waiting; completing skill development activities; and telling, writing, and narrating) during a reading class? Results from the classroom observations in all of the 20 classrooms can be seen in Table 1 as the percent of the classroom hour that was allocated to each of the instructional categories. It does appear that the 20 teachers in the sample diversified their instructional time during their reading lessons and included multiple activities or assignments. There was quite a range of difference among the classes regarding how time was allocated for the different routines. One teacher devoted 100% of her time to reading and responding. Another devoted all, 100%, of her time to listening and discussing. Five teachers did not include reading and responding to coordinated text at all. Their lessons were filled with activities removed from text reading. Ten of the classrooms did not reflect telling, writing, and narrating activities, which one would assume as important in a whole language environment, at all.

*Table 1.*Percent of time observed in each instructional routine at each target school.

School	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
read/respond	68	0	19	35	0	0	36	55	13	56
listen/discuss	06	26	08	33	48	13	0	13	04	23
waiting	0	22	03	0	18	06	07	27	05	21
skill develop	0	52	47	22	18	81	50	0	47	0
tell/write/narr	26	0	23	10	16	0	07	05	31	0
other	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TIME OBSERVED	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
School	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
read/respond	48	34	0	100	38	72	0	42	40	53
listen/discuss	52	40	100	0	29	22	19	22	32	07
waiting	0	0	0	0	03	06	33	08	03	06
skill develop	0	26	0	0	30	0	0	0	20	13
tell/write/narr	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	11	0	21
other	0	0	0	0	0	0	48	17	05	0
TIME OBSERVED	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Averaging the percentages across the 20 classrooms for each category from the Table presents a depiction as to how time is allocated by teachers and demonstrated by pupils in these monitored reading

classes. In the reading classes observed in this study, it was observed that teachers direct and pupils react by:

1. Reading and responding 35.47% of the instructional time;
2. Listening and discussing 24.89% of the instructional time;
3. Waiting 8.36% of the instructional time;
4. Completing skill development activities 20.28% of the instructional time;
5. Telling, writing, and narrating 7.52% of the instructional time;
6. Devoting 3.47% of the instructional time to other activities.

Question 1 addressed the use of time in reading classes as directed by the teachers. On the average, teachers devoted almost one-third of their instructional class time to having children read and respond to coordinated text under guidance. On the average, the least amount of reading class time was devoted to having children retell, tell, write, or narrate about the stories or materials used in the reading sequence.

Question 2 investigated the suggestion by Blair (1995) and Fielding and Pearson (1994) which posited that effective reading instruction would involve children in reading concentrated amounts of coordinated text during daily reading lessons. Specifically, the study sought to answer the question, does time allocated for reading coordinated text exceed more than 50% of the total time designated for reading instruction? The answer appears to be "no." Teachers observed in this study allocated only 35% of instructional time for children to read and respond to concentrated amounts of coordinated text.

The perceptions of teachers participating in this study relating to how much time students should devote to reading and responding to text does not appear to match actual recorded classroom practice. The amount of time allocated to actual sustained text reading is a full 15 percentage points less than would be recommended by Blair (1995). This level of sustained reading, approximately one-third of class time, is well below the upper limits of their own projected perceptions which revealed their beliefs that as much as 58%, more than half, of the class time should be devoted to reading and responding to text (McNinch, et al., 1996). Teachers clearly perceive substantial amounts of text reading as being important and beneficial to children, but they are unable to fit this vital routine into the compressed daily curriculum that demands quantities of time be spent in skill development and language extension activities. If reading promotes reading and there is instructional merit in the pedagogical recommendations, then teachers must do more to increase the time their pupils devote to reading coordinated text.

If children grow in reading by reading, as suggested by Fielding and Pearson (1994), then teachers may be falling short in their planning and implementing responsibilities. It appears that children spend about equal amounts of time in the areas of reading and responding, skill development, telling, retelling, and narrating. This equal distribution of effort and activity may not be ideal for reading development. Teachers have the responsibility to plan instructional lessons that require more reading of coordinated text.

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