

1-1-1986

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### Recommended Citation

Wiesendanger, K. D. (1986). Durkin Revisited. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 26 (2). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol26/iss2/1](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol26/iss2/1)

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# DURKIN REVISITED

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In his classic study (1917) Thorndike successfully demonstrated that reading was a complex process and that its successful completion was determined not in terms of whether or not a student correctly verbalized a string of words, but whether or not he understood the material being read. The Thorndike study had a significant impact on the development of educational strategies that emphasized reading comprehension as opposed to mere verbalization. As a result of Thorndike's work, the subsequent logical questions included: Can comprehension actually be taught? And, if so, what is the most effective means of doing so? Studies (Goudey, 1968; Frase, 1970; and Brady, 1974) focused on questioning strategies, including placement and question type. Finally, in 1976, Dolores Durkin, as a member of the Center for the Study of Reading, conducted what many hoped would be a definitive study, in order to gain more specific knowledge about the instruction of reading comprehension. This research was supported by the National Institute of Education.

While Thorndike's study was considered a significant contribution because he emphasized reading as a reasoning process, Durkin's study (1978) was a milestone in the reading literature partly because of her unique classification of questions. Instead of classifying questions in terms of a taxonomy, Durkin differentiated between questions that focus on the process of comprehension as opposed to the product. She defined process questions as those that assist the students to better understand the material by working out the meaning of units larger than a word. Examples of process questions might include: What do you need to know to draw this conclusion? To what does this refer in this sentence? What words tell us that the author is making a comparison?

Product questions, on the other hand, simply assess a child's comprehension of a selection. They include questions like the following: When did mother go to the store? Why was the little boy sad?

Durkin places the type of question that asks a child to see if he has understood what he has read under comprehension assessment and the type of question that helps him to understand the material under comprehension instruction. Using her unique method of question classification, Durkin conducted a study (1978) which analyzed comprehension instruction from three different perspectives. The three-fold study concentrated on the amount of time spent on teaching comprehension during the reading period. The sub-studies analyzed teaching comprehension from the viewpoints of teachers, the schools, and students. Findings revealed that little time was spent in comprehension instruction.

To determine whether or not any significant changes have been made in the teaching of reading comprehension during the last eight years, the present study duplicated Durkin's original sub-study that analyzed the types of activities and instructional procedures that took place during the reading period from the perspective of the teacher. Of specific interest was whether teachers who were taught the difference between questions related to process, and questions related to product, as well as how to formulate such questions, improve their reading instruction. Consequently, all the teachers in the present study had completed a course in which Teaching Them To Read (Durkin 1983) was used as the major text. The distinction between testing comprehension and teaching comprehension was thoroughly covered. Except for this one variable, care was taken to strictly replicate Durkin's original sub-study.

As in the original Durkin study, all teachers knew beforehand that they would be observed and the recording time began when the period actually began. This researcher observed 20 teachers for a total of 3,120 minutes, whereas Durkin observed 24 teachers for a total of 4,469 minutes in her sub-study that analyzed comprehension instruction from the perspective of the teacher. As in the original Durkin study, fourth grade teachers were observed and visits were carried out on three successive days. Each teacher was observed at least three times for a minimum of 150 minutes. The visits were equally divided among the five days and ranged from 40 to 60 minutes in length.

In the present study, nineteen of the classrooms were taught by women, one by a male. There were no combination grades and no teacher aides. All the teachers observed had master's degrees in reading and had been teaching from

two to sixteen years, with a mean of 8.6 years. The number of students in the classroom ranged from 18 to 27, with a mean of 23.2. In three schools, interclass grouping was used; the rest of the classrooms were self-contained. All observations were done in Western New York by the author from September through May during the 1983-84 school year. The categories used in the present study to assess comprehension instruction are those developed by Durkin. Not only do the categories lend themselves to observational research, but Durkin included directions for using the categories to facilitate replication of her research.

Table 1  
Percentage of teacher time spent on  
comprehension and study skills  
during the reading period

| Behavioral<br>Categories               | No. of<br>Minutes | % of<br>3120<br>Minutes |
|--|-------------------|-------------------------|
| Comprehension: instruction             | 462               | 14.81%                  |
| Compre.: review of instruc.            | 94                | 3.01                    |
| Comprehension: application             | 129               | 4.13                    |
| Comprehension: assignment              | 34                | 1.09                    |
| Compre.: help with assign.             | 123               | 3.94                    |
| Compre.: prep. for rdg.                | 97                | 3.11                    |
| Comprehension: assessment              | 310               | 9.94                    |
| Comprehension: prediction              | N.O.              |                         |
| Study skills: instruction              | 64                | 2.05                    |
| Study skills: review of<br>instruction | N.O.              |                         |
| Study skills: application              | 36                | 1.15                    |
| Study skills: assignment               | 21                | .67                     |

N.O. = not observed

Summarized in Table 1 are the amounts of time spent on comprehension activities and instruction observations of the 20 fourth grade teachers. As shown in the table, the largest percentage of time (14.81) during the reading period was spent on comprehension instruction. Comprehension assessment accounted for almost 9.94% of the time spent.

Table 2  
 Percentage of teacher time spent during the reading  
 period on activities connected with assignments

| Behavioral<br>Categories   | No. of<br>Minutes | % of<br>3120<br>Minutes |
|----------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| Comprehension: assignment  | 34                | 1.09%                   |
| Compre.: help with assign. | 123               | 3.94                    |
| Comprehension: assessment  | 310               | 9.94                    |
| Study skills: assignment   | 21                | .67                     |
| Assignment: gives          | 118               | 3.78                    |
| Assignment: helps with     | 115               | 3.69                    |
| Assignment: checks         | 62                | 1.99                    |

The amount of time teachers spent during the reading period on activities connected with assignments was 25.11% (shown in Table 2). This included the following: activities connected with comprehension assignments, study skills assignments and assignments excluding those for comprehension and study skills. Assignments connected with comprehension which required comprehension of connected text, helping with the comprehension assignments, and comprehension assessment of assigned readings totaled 14.97% of teacher time. Giving, assisting with or checking assignments other than for comprehension or study skills account for 9.46% of teacher time.

As shown in Table 3 (following page), the amount of time teachers spent on oral reading, phonics, structural analysis and word meaning combined was 15.58% of the total reading period. Analyzing each aspect separately, word meaning accounted for 6.09%, structural analysis 5.87% and phonic analysis 3.62% of the total time spent reading. Oral reading was not observed.

#### Comparison Between Present Study and Durkin Study

1. Descriptive comparisons between the findings of the present study and the findings of the Durkin Study were made. When analyzing the categories that accounted for the largest percentages of time spend during the reading period, Durkin does not mention comprehension instruction because of the miniscule amount of time she observed teachers spending in this category. In sharp contrast, the

Table 3

Percentage of teacher time spent during the reading period on various types of reading instruction, review, and application excluding comprehension and study skills.

| Behavioral Categories      | No. of Minutes | % of 3120 Minutes |
|----------------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| Oral reading: instruction  | N. O.          |                   |
| Oral reading: application  | N. O.          |                   |
| Phonics: instruction       | 33             | 1.06%             |
| Phonics: review            | 17             | .54               |
| Phonics: application       | 63             | 2.02              |
| Structural analysis:       |                |                   |
| instruction                | 36             | 1.15              |
| review                     | 27             | .87               |
| application                | 120            | 3.85              |
| Word meanings: instruction | 64             | 2.05              |
| Word meanings: review      | N.O.           |                   |
| Word meanings: application | 126            | 4.04              |

Table 4

Categories for the reading program with the largest percentage of time allotted to them

| Behavioral Categories          | No. of Minutes | % of 3120 Minutes |
|--------------------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| Comprehension: instruction     | 462            | 14.81%            |
| Comprehension: assessment      | 310            | 9.94              |
| Non-instruction                | 146            | 4.68              |
| Comprehension: application     | 129            | 4.13              |
| Word meanings: applications    | 126            | 4.04              |
| Comprehension: help w/ assign. | 123            | 3.94              |
| Structural analysis: applic.   | 120            | 3.85              |
| Transition                     | 120            | 3.85              |
| Assignment: gives              | 118            | 3.78              |
| Assignment: helps with         | 115            | 3.69              |

present findings indicated that the largest percentage of time during the reading period was allocated to comprehension instruction. Durkin found that less than 1% of the teacher's time during the reading period was spent on comprehension instruction; this compared to 17.65% in the present study. Since Durkin's categories for classifying teacher behavior in relation to reading were used and her instructions for using the categories were adhered to, differences in the definition of comprehension or its assessment could not account for the differences in the findings of the two studies.

2. In Durkin's study, comprehension-assessment accounted for the largest percentage of time spent during the reading period. In contrast, the New York study shows comprehension assessment ranking second to comprehension instruction in the amount of time spent. Observers in both the Durkin and New York State studies, found that assessment questions were taken primarily from the basal manuals. However, the present study found that teachers were more likely to use assessment questions as a guide for developing comprehension questions. In other words, if a child misses an assessment question, an instruction question would be developed to assist in the comprehension process.

3. Categories of non-instruction and transition accounted for over 20% of the time spent in the reading class in Durkin's study. This is in sharp contrast to the present findings in which both categories accounted for slightly over 8% of the total reading class period.

4. Not only did Durkin find little emphasis on comprehension instruction, she also observed little emphasis on the teaching of phonics, structural analysis or word meaning assignments. However, in the later New York study, time spent during the reading period on phonics, structural analysis, and word meanings, was found to be significantly greater, with structural analysis receiving more time than the other two. While more time than was observed could justifiably be spent on teaching structural analysis, it was significantly more than what had been observed by Durkin.

5. Another considerable difference between the findings of the two studies was the time being spent on teachers listening to oral reading. In Durkin's study, this category ranked fourth in the amount of time spent during the total reading period. Oral reading was not observed at the fourth grade level.

6. Present observations found word meaning instruction much more prevalent than had been observed by Durkin. Word meaning application ranked fifth in the categories. Word meaning was not ranked by Durkin among the categories in which the largest percentage of time was spent.

### Summary of Results

The findings of the present study indicated that teachers did spend a significant amount of time teaching for comprehension. While assessment of comprehension was likewise observed, teachers used assessment questions to determine the instructional needs in comprehension. On the contrary, Durkin found that the largest percentage of time was spent on comprehension assessment with little time being spent in direct verbal instruction. While assessment received the greatest emphasis, it was not used as a guide to comprehension instruction but rather to determine who could or could not comprehend the assignment. Further, the emphasis was on literal questions that were primarily taken from basal manuals. Little class time was spent on preparation for reading the assignment.

Durkin also observed a considerable amount of time being used for non-instruction and transition, whereas this researcher observed non-instruction and transition being kept to a minimum. In contrast, the present findings revealed more time being spent on structural analysis and word meanings than in the Durkin study.

Whereas the observers of both studies saw that teachers used basals, Durkin found that the emphasis was on use of ditto sheets and workbooks, with little time allotted to preparation for reading, word identification or word meaning skills. The present observer found that more emphasis was spent on these prerequisite skills for reading and less on workbooks and ditto sheets. It appears that teachers in the present study spent their time more constructively and that they tried to maximize the amount of instruction time.

### Implications

Durkin requested that the best teachers be selected for her observations. Likewise, the teachers in the present study were probably considered far better than average. The major difference between the two groups is that the teachers in the present study had completed a course in which Teaching Them to Read (Durkin, 1983) was used as the major text. The distinction between testing comprehension

and teaching comprehension was thoroughly covered. It would seem that the results at least imply that teachers who were taught the difference between questions related to process and questions related to product, as well as how to formulate such questions, can indeed improve their reading instruction. Additionally, such instruction seems to result in teachers who are more cognizant of the fact that time should be spent on such things as preparation for reading, word identification and word meaning skills.

#### What This All Means

At least 90% of the teachers in the elementary school use the basal reader approach as the primary means of teaching reading. Consequently, the questions asked are the ones taken from the manuals. Questions are not in themselves comprehension instruction (Nicholson, 1982) and are typically examined in isolation from the larger conversational sequence (Chall, 1967). In analyzing the comprehension component of basals, Cooke (1970) and Hatcher (1971) found the majority of questions included in basals to be at the literal level. This is perhaps the reason that some teachers equate reading thinking skills with the most narrow of literal comprehension skills (Henry, 1963).

Because the definition of comprehension instruction found in basal readers differs from Durkin's classification some teachers apparently feel they are teaching for comprehension when they are, in fact, asking assessment questions. Granted, questions can serve a number of purposes, and the teachers' intention in asking the question may not be instructional (Nicholson, 1982). However, Durkin's classifications mandate that teachers understand the distinction between questions that assess and those that instruct. If the basal manuals do not distinguish between process and product, then the institutions that prepare teachers must assume the responsibility.

Long range investigations must be conducted before the reading profession can truly measure the effects that implementing Durkin's questioning classifications will have on the child's ability to comprehend. However, as an observer of over 50 hours of reading instruction, I would like to address several concerns that have been raised concerning her classic study, such as the question (MacGinitie 1983) that Durkin's view might result in less purposeful reading, in lessons that are too structured and in less time being spent actually reading.

It would appear to this writer that MacGinitie's fears are unwarranted. Durkin is well known for advocating that reading instruction be based on the needs of students. Her emphasis on process in no way precludes that student needs be taken into account. On the contrary, Durkin would, for example, advocate helping children develop the process of sequencing only if they needed help in sequencing. Likewise, Durkin's classifications do not imply that lessons be more structured than otherwise. Assisting the child to develop a strategy for understanding the process of sequencing by simply asking such questions as "What signal words did you find in the selection that help us know that one event comes before another?" does not indicate more or less structure. Finally, process questions do not result in less time for reading. On the contrary, by incorporating process questions into the reading lesson, more time could be spent reading. My observations suggest that Durkin is justified in encouraging teachers to follow a child's incorrect response to an assessment question with an instruction question. Certainly this approach makes more sense than simply giving him more assessment questions when he is unable to answer the first one correctly. There is less time spent on ditto sheets and workbook pages which all too often do not instruct because the child must understand the concept before s/he can complete the assignment.

In sum, Durkin's classic study has had profound effects on reading instruction. This is due to the fact that she made us aware of the question patterns that existed in the elementary school. The primary significance of these findings implies that teachers can be taught not only to differentiate between process and product questions but also that they can successfully implement such questioning strategies in the classroom. While additional research needs to be conducted to understand all its implications, my observations convince me that more effort should be made to translate her research into classroom practice.

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