

April 1981

Validating Previewing as a Method of Improving Fifth and Sixth Grade Students' Comprehension of Short Stories

Michael F. Graves
University of Minnesota

Rebecca J. Palmer
University of Minnesota

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj>

Recommended Citation

Graves, Michael F. and Palmer, Rebecca J. (1981) "Validating Previewing as a Method of Improving Fifth and Sixth Grade Students' Comprehension of Short Stories," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol15/iss1/4>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Michigan Reading Journal by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Validating Previewing as a Method of Improving Fifth and Sixth Grade Students' Comprehension of Short Stories¹

Michael F. Graves
Rebecca J. Palmer

*Michael Graves is an associate professor
specializing in reading education at
the University of Minnesota.*

*Rebecca Palmer is a Ph.D candidate in Curriculum
and Instruction at the University of Minnesota.*

Over the past five years or so, the need for teachers of children beyond the primary grade level to help their students understand various sorts of material they read has become increasingly apparent. In responding to this need, various authors have suggested a variety of procedures that teachers can use to help their students with different types of reading. Many of these suggestions seem well worth following, and most of them probably do help students with their reading. Unfortunately, however, very few of these procedures have been formally tested in the classroom. The study reported here is one in a series of investigations which intended to validate teaching procedures which are widely recommended. The specific procedure investigated is that of giving students previews of short stories before they read them.

Much of the reading students do in school is assigned by the teacher. Students are often asked to read a story they did not choose themselves and to develop their own strategies for understanding and remembering what they read. But understanding and remembering a story that someone else assigns can be extremely difficult. Recent research has revealed the importance of prior knowledge on memory and comprehension (10, 11). Authorities have pointed out that as students read they use their previous knowledge to make judgments about what to forget and what to remember and they make inferences relating what they already know to what the author has to say or implies (4). Yet when stories are assigned by the teacher, students may have very little prior knowledge of them, and

thus the students are in a very poor position to know what to remember. Moreover, they have to figure out what is important for the teacher or the class, not just for themselves.

Helping students with the task of deciding just what is important and should be remembered is not easy, and certainly helping them with the task will mean employing different strategies with different selections. But one approach, the one investigated in this study, is to give students previews of upcoming selections, in this case previews of short stories. The previews used were designed to give students something to work with as they read the stories by providing them with three sorts of knowledge. The first sort of knowledge the previews attempted to build was thematic knowledge, knowledge students already have relevant to the particular topics of the stories. Using this sort of knowledge aids readers in making appropriate contributions as they read and in turn makes for greater comprehension and stronger links between the knowledge they already have and the new information presented in the story.

The second sort of knowledge the previews attempted to build was structured knowledge, knowledge students already have about the structure of well-formed stories. What students already know about a story's structure helps them identify structural components of a passage and leads them to make certain predictions about the characters, the events, and the plot. Knowing this information helps students become much more efficient when processing texts (10, 13).

The third sort of knowledge the previews attempted to build was specific knowledge about the plot and characters of the story to be read. Having such knowledge, of course, leaves readers with less new information to deal with.

STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN THE STUDY

The students who took part in the study were 40 fifth grade students and 40 sixth grade students from a public elementary school located in a middle-class suburb of Minneapolis. Within each grade level, equal numbers of children identified by the school as high ability students and children identified by the school as low ability students were included in the study.

MATERIALS USED

Materials used included two short stories, previews for each of the stories, tests for each story, directions for the teachers, and two word games.

One short story was "Test" by Theodore Thomas, and the other was "Soldier's Home" by Ernest Hemingway. The stories were deliberately selected to be fairly difficult for many of the students. "Test" is about 1,000 words long, is written at the sixth grade level according to the Fry Formula, and was specifically written for youngsters. "Soldier's Home" is about 2,000 words long, is written at the seventh grade level according to the Fry Formula, and was written for an adult audience.

The previews were read aloud to the students. Each preview began with the title of the story and the author. Beyond this the previews at-

1. The research reported here was supported by a grant from the Research Foundation of the National Council of Teachers of English.

tempted to do three things. First, an introductory paragraph attempted to provide a link between the theme or topic of the story and the students' lives. Second, the plot of the story was described up to the point of the climax. Third, sandwiched in with plot description were brief introductions to each of the characters. Each of the previews was about 400 words long.

The tests each consisted of 18 four-option, multiple-choice questions. Six of these were factual and answered in the preview, six were factual but not answered in the preview, and six were inferential and not answered in the preview.

The directions for the teachers gave detailed descriptions on how to administer the preview and no preview treatments.

The word games were puzzles designed to give students who finished early something to do while other students completed their work.

PROCEDURES

The study required two 30-50 minute blocks of time, one for "Test" and one for "Soldier's Home." The treatments were administered to the students by their teachers in their regular classrooms. Each student received a review for one of the stories and no preview for the other story, and half of the students received a preview with "Test" and the other half a preview with "Soldier's Home." When administering the preview treatments, the teachers told students that they were going to give them a preview of a story after which they were to read the story and take a test. The students then read the story silently and took the test as soon as they were finished. When administering the no-preview treatment, the teachers simply told students that they were going to read a story and take a test and then had them proceed with the story and the test. After finishing the test, students were allowed either to work on a word game or to do free reading.

VARIABLES AND ANALYSIS

The independent variables analyzed in the study were *grade* (5th, 6th), *ability* (high, low), and *treatment* (preview, no preview). The dependent measure was the 18-item, multiple-choice test. The data were analyzed using the analysis of variance procedure. Dif-

ferences reported as significant are significant at the $p < .01$ level.

RESULTS

The main effects of the study are shown in Table 1. As can be seen from the table, students receiving

TABLE 1
Mean Percentages of Correct Responses for Each Condition of Treatment, Grade, and Ability

Treatment	Preview 74%	No Preview 69%
Ability	High 79%	Low 64%
Grade	Sixth 71%	Fifth 71%

the preview scored higher than those not receiving the preview, and high ability students scored higher than low ability ones, but fifth and sixth grade students scored similarly.

The analysis of various is shown in Table 2. As can be seen from the

TABLE 2
Analysis of Variance

Grade (G)	.006	1	.006	.001
Ability (A)	278.256	1	278.256	40.914*
G x A	.056	1	.056	.008
Between Error	516.875		76	6.801
Treatment (T)	31.506	1	31.506	10.126*
T x G	1.806	1	1.806	.581
T x A	1.056	1	1.056	.339
T x G x A	7.656	1	7.656	2.461
Withing Error	236.475		76	3.112

* $p < .01$

table, the effects of treatment and ability are significant ($p < .01$) while the effects of grade and the interaction effects are not. Again, students do better with previews than without them, and high ability students do better than low ability ones.

The effects of students receiving a preview can be further seen if performance on each of the three sorts of questions that were asked—factual questions that could be answered from the preview, factual questions that could not be answered from the preview, and inferential questions—are considered separately. Students' scores on each of these types of questions are shown in Table 3. No statistical analysis was done on these scores. However, inspection of the table indicates that students did better on both types of factual questions when they received

a preview but having a preview did not improve their performance on inferential questions. Also, it should be noted that they did quite poorly with inferential questions.

TABLE 3
Mean Percentages of Correct Responses to Three Types of Questions

Question Type	Treatment	
	Preview	No Preview
Factual Questions Answered in Previews	84%	76%
Factual Questions Not Answered in Previews	86%	77%
Inferential Questions	52%	54%

DISCUSSION

The results require little discussion. The major finding is that a brief preview, which did not take an unreasonable amount of time to construct and which took only about three minutes of class time to present, increased students' comprehension of the short stories read. More specifically, the preview increased both comprehension scores on factual questions that could be answered from the preview and comprehension scores on factual questions that could not be answered from the preview by better than ten percent. The fact that the preview increased students' ability to answer the factual questions it provided answers for is not surprising. Still, many teaching practices that common sense suggests will work often do not work (5). The fact that the preview increased students' ability to answer the factual questions it did not provide answers for was less predictable. We believe that the most likely explanation of this result is that knowing some facts about a story before reading it reduces the attention students need to devote to those facts while reading and thus allows them to give more attention to other facts. Of course, this same line of thinking would suggest that being given a preview would increase the readers' capacity for dealing with inferential questions, and this did not happen in the present study. It may be, however, that stronger and richer previews could help students with

inferential comprehension. Just what might constitute stronger and richer previews and whether or not they facilitate inferential comprehension are matters for further research.

The results with respect to the effects of *grade* and *ability* require only one comment, and the comment is tangential to the main thrust of the study. Differences within grades are frequently very large; here the ability differences were quite large, while there were no differences between grades. As teachers, we must frequently take this fact into account in teaching and making assignments.

In conclusion, we would simply say that the present study provides reasonable evidence for the effectiveness of previewing. We hope that future studies will support this finding, go on to further explore the effects of previewing, and go on to validate—or invalidate—other common teaching practices.

REFERENCES

1. Anderson, R.C. "The Notion of Schemata and the Educational Enterprise." In R.C. Anderson, R.J. Spiro, & W.E. Montague (Eds.) *SCHOOLING AND THE ACQUISITION OF KNOWLEDGE*, Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1977.
2. Aulls, M.W. *DEVELOPMENTAL AND REMEDIAL READING IN THE MIDDLE GRADES*. Boston, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, 1978
3. Bransford, J.D., & Johnson, M.K. "Contextual Prerequisites for Understanding: Some Investigations of Comprehension and Recall." *JOURNAL OF VERBAL LEARNING AND VERBAL BEHAVIOR*, 1972, 11, 717-726.
4. Clark, H. H., & Haviland, S. E. "Comprehension and the Given-new Contract." In R.O. Freedle (Ed.), *DISCOURSE PRODUCTION AND COMPREHENSION*. Norwood, N. J.: Ablex Publishing, 1977.
5. Graves, M.F. "Validating Teaching Procedures Designed to Facilitate Secondary Students' Comprehension of Content Area Texts." *RESEARCH IN READING IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS*, 1979, 2(2), 1-15.
6. Graves, M.F., & Bender, S.D. "Preteaching Vocabulary to Secondary Students: A Classroom Experiment." *MINNESOTA ENGLISH JOURNAL*, 1980, 10(2), 27-34.
7. Graves, M. F., & Clark, D. L. The Effect of Adjunct Questions on High School Low Achievers' Reading Comprehension." *READING IMPROVEMENT*, in press.
8. Graves, M. F., Palmer, R.J., & Furniss, D.W. *STRUCTURING READING ACTIVITIES FOR ENGLISH CLASSES*. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1976.
9. Harris, A. J., & Sipay, E. R. *HOW TO INCREASE READING ABILITY*. New York: David McKay, 1975.
10. Rumelhart, D. E., & Ortony, A. "The Representation of Knowledge in Memory." In R. C. Anderson, R. J. Spiro, & W. E. Montague (Eds.), *SCHOOLING AND THE ACQUISITION OF KNOWLEDGE*. Hillsdale, N. J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1977.
11. Smith, F. *UNDERSTANDING READING*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978.
12. Spache, G. D., & Spache, E. B. *READING IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1977.
13. Thorndyke, P. W. "Cognitive Structures in Comprehension and Memory of Narrative Discourse." *COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY*, 1977, 9, 77-110.

Reading Assessment: Formal and Informal

Priscilla A. Drum

Priscilla A. Drum is an assistant professor and head of the Language Development and Reading Program within the Graduate School of Education at the University of California at Santa Barbara.

Teachers spend hours assessing the reading achievement of their students. Are the hours spent in testing useful? Are the tests helpful in guiding instruction? Improving performance? What uses are made of testing information? This paper will examine these questions.

FORMAL ASSESSMENT

Formal assessment refers to the use of published testing instruments, usually administered at scheduled times during the academic year. The manuals that accompany these tests provide interpretations of the scores such as

expected grade-level performance.

Two types of formal reading assessment instruments commonly used are norm-referenced tests and criterion-referenced tests. The difference between the two is mainly in intent or purpose for testing (6). A norm-referenced test interprets a score in reference to other test-takers to determine how well individuals or groups are progressing as compared with other pupils. A criterion-referenced test is constructed so that a score is interpreted as indicating what skills or knowledge of the content are known.

The question discussed here is how useful are these two types of tests for teacher decisions in the classroom.

NORM-REFERENCED TESTS

Norm-referenced reading tests provide a stable measure of performance by which comparisons can be made with the norming population (8). For instance, School District XYZ had an average reading achievement score two percentage points above that of the norming group, or John Doe performed at the 4.5 grade level though he is actually in the seventh grade. The results are