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Paired Reading: Two questions

By S. Winter

Summary

Paired Reading (PR) has been used with apparent success in a range of parent- and peer-tutor applications to teach reading. This article addresses two questions hitherto ignored in the PR literature: (1) to what extent do PR tutors actually use PR?, and (2) is there any relationship between tutor adherence to PR and tutee reading gains?. It is suggested that tutors trained to use PR frequently fail to employ it when tutoring. A summary is offered of a recent Hongkong study which suggests that the problem of aberrant tutors can be a very great one indeed. A report is offered of the results of an analysis of PR training videotapes produced by a Local Authority in England. They reveal a similar tutor adherence problem. Interestingly, it was found in the Hongkong study that no link existed between tutor adherence to PR and tutee gains. There follows a discussion of why this may be. It is suggested that human and organisational factors may be important in determining the success of PR projects.

Paired Reading (PR) research conducted over the last decade has shown that parents and peers can act as effective tutors. However, as Topping (1988) has remarked, very little attention has been devoted to *what actually happens* during such projects. The PR literature consists almost entirely of demonstration projects (intending to show that PR can produce reading gains) or comparison projects (intending to ascertain which of a number of techniques, including PR, may be superior in effectiveness). The emphasis upon outcome may have been a consequence of the fact that most projects have been organised by teachers and educational psychologists who have become involved with PR as a way of responding to children's needs and providing a service.

This article refrains from presenting another project report in the mould of so many others,

and instead concentrates on two questions of critical importance to the PR literature: (1) Do PR tutors actually use PR when tutoring?, and (2) Does it matter if they don't?. These questions focus upon the issues of tutor adherence and the influence thereof upon tutees' reading gains.

Do PR Tutors Use PR?

Many of the PR project reports assume that tutors who are trained to use PR actually use it when tutoring. Very few researchers present data to confirm this. However, if one looks closely at the PR literature one does find reports of aberrant tutors. Most of these reports are anecdotal, often referring to a difficulty that a particular parent may have had in, for example, praising her child (eg Spalding et al, 1984).

Firmer evidence comes from Limbrick et al (1985) and Winter (1988) who made relatively systematic measurements of tutor behaviour during PR sessions. These clearly show that tutors almost invariably failed to follow the PR technique in which they had been trained. Tutors appeared to be particularly aberrant in their use of positive reinforcement for desirable reading behaviour, failing to achieve the 30 per cent to 60 per cent reinforcement rates described in the early work of Morgan and Lyon (1979). There follows a brief summary of the study with which I was involved (Winter, 1988).

The 1988 Hongkong Study

In this study ten and eleven year old pupils from English Language Primary Schools in Hongkong took part in a peer-tutored PR project. Training for tutors proceeded by way of a standard sequence of description, demonstration, practice and concurrent

feedback. During the project teachers supervised the performance of tutors. The reading ability of tutees was assessed at project start and end by way of the GAP Reading Comprehension Test.

Tape recordings of tutoring sessions were analysed to provide information regarding tutor adherence to PR. Those variables relating to tutor behaviour and found to be measured reliably were:

- Number of errors corrected in any way by the tutor.
- Number of errors left uncorrected.
- Number of instances of positive reinforcement.
- Number of words modelled (short pause; under two seconds).
- Number of errors corrected in any other way.
- Correction rate in relation to number of errors.
- Words modelled during period analysed.
- Modelling rate in relation to number of errors.
- Praise rate in relation to number of words read.
- Modelling rate in relation to no. of corrections made.
- Short-pause modelling rate in relation to corrections.

It was found that tutors failed during the project to follow several procedures for PR in which they had been trained and supposedly supervised. Tutors were particularly negligent in regard to positive reinforcement. The highest rate of positive reinforcement in the sessions analysed stood at a level of one event per 38 seconds (or once in every 50 words read). The average rate was less than 1 in every 200 words.

A large number of tutors observed failed to cor-

rect errors made by tutees. Errors left uncorrected outweighed errors corrected by a ratio of 4:1. Many errors left uncorrected were major ones, including occasional instances of skipped lines and pages.

Where error correction occurred at all tutors were quite conscientious in employing modelling (98 per cent of error corrections). However there was a tendency for tutors to be careless about timing; about two out of every five words modelled were supplied after a pause substantially shorter than the four second pause which tutors had been trained to use.

Despite all this tutees made gains in GAP reading age (although in the case of one school the mean gain did not reach a significant level).

Analysis of PR Training Videotapes

Data such as the sort described above runs the risk of attracting the criticism that insufficient training was given to tutors. Yet training in the study described was typical in length and quality to that given in many other PR projects.

The most comforting indication that tutor aberrance is a general phenomenon comes from the PR training videotape produced by Kirklees Local Education Authority. The tape shows several parent-tutors modelling PR with (presumably) their own children. The method for analysing tutoring behaviour described in Winter (1988) was applied to these video sequences as far as was possible in the absence of copies of the reading matter used by tutees. Findings are summarised in Figure 1. They indicate that parents used positive reinforcement

Figure 1. PR Training Tapes: Analysis of Tutoring

DYAD	Duration of PR (secs)	Word read by tutee	Pos.Rf./words read	Pos.Rf./duration
1	118	65	0.031	0.017
2	207	134	0.030	0.019
3	102	87	0.000	0.000
4	192	110	0.000	0.000
5	133	90	0.011	0.008
6	288	337	0.006	0.007
7	235	130	0.031	0.017
8	243	254	0.030	0.019
9	180	206	0.000	0.000
10	398	455	0.018	0.020
Total duration of video sequences: 2096 secs (34.93 mins)				
Total words read during sequences: 1868				
Mean positive reinforcement rate (pos.rf./words read): 0.016				
Mean positive reinforcement rate (pos.rf./duration): 0.014				

at a mean rate of 1 every 64 words (1 every 72 seconds). This falls far below the rates described in the original work of Morgan and Lyon (1979), and only marginally exceeds those found in the Hongkong study. Three of the tutors shown on the videotape employ no verbal reinforcement at all.

Also apparent in the videotapes is the inability of several tutors to pause to allow the child time to attempt or self-correct a word. There are several sequences involving the parent and child reading together in which the parent is quite clearly reading ahead of the child on many words, modelling words that the child might well be able to read. At times one wonders why the child has not simply slipped into 'auto-pilot', closing his/her eyes and repeating whatever the tutor reads.

The failure of parents to employ PR procedures (despite having received the training current in that Local Education Authority) calls into question tutors' PR adherence in a large number of projects that have been based in that part of the world.

Does it Matter if PR Tutors Fail to Use PR?

PR project organisers have almost invariably placed great emphasis on training and supervision of tutors in the belief that the success of PR projects is underlain by the PR technique. It is commonly assumed that tutors who adhere to the technique closely will be more effective; their tutees will make bigger gains.

Explanations offered for the effectiveness of PR encourage this assumption. Morgan and Lyon (op cit) offered a broadly behavioural analysis, emphasising the participant modelling and positive reinforcement components of PR. Bushell, Miller and Robson (1982) drew attention to other possible factors, arguing that PR provided opportunities for the development of prediction based on semantic and syntactic cues. In each case our attention is drawn to aspects of the technique which account for PR's success. The implication is that those tutors who adhere to PR closely will be more effective than those who do not.

There is no evidence for this assumption. This is largely because there has until recently been little attempt to measure tutor behaviour during PR sessions. A direct consequence has been that it has been impossible to relate project outcome (tutee gains) to what happens in tutoring sessions.

The Hongkong study described earlier was an exception. Attempts were made to relate process

to outcome. However, no relationship was found between tutor behaviour during PR and reading gains made by tutees at project end. The implication is that adherence to PR procedures (at least over the range observed in this study) has no impact whatsoever upon the effectiveness of tutoring, at least in regard to the tutor variables measured and the range of values available in the data.

Where Does This Leave Us?

It is important to note that (1) the Hongkong study was a small one, (2) only one measure of reading ability was employed, (3) a ceiling effect resulted in reading age data for some tutees being removed from the analysis, (4) variables relating to tutor and tutee behaviour during PR sessions were based on a small sample of data, (5) some possibly important PR variables (eg proportion of time spent in independent reading, specificity of positive reinforcement) were not measured, and (6) some of the variables that were measured displayed very narrow ranges, thereby making more difficult the task of locating relationships with other variables.

Nevertheless it does appear possible that (1) relatively little PR occurs during PR projects and (2) it matters little anyway, since the success of PR projects rests on other factors. What might these be?

Additional reading practice may account for the gains, but this is unlikely in view of evidence showing (1) no relationship between reading gains and time spent reading (Miller et al, 1986) or amount read (Winter, 1988), (2) inferior gains for control groups which engage in private reading during tutoring projects, and (3) gains in reading in projects which attempt to improve social or emotional adjustment of pupils (eg Wooster, 1986).

Presence of a tutor may have a general modelling effect upon the tutee's interest, confidence and/or persistence when reading. However, this is not supported by peer-tutor research by Limbrick et al (1985), Crombie and Low (1986), and others which indicates that untrained tutoring is less effective than trained tutoring.

Winter (1988) suggests that human and organisational features of PR projects may be of importance. These might include:

1. training for tutors (that those who are involved in a project know that training has taken place, regardless of the content of training),
2. supervision for tutors (regardless of what transpires during supervision)

3. the extent to which children are able to make an informed choice about involvement in a project (this may have been important in accounting for school differences in outcome in the Hongkong project: see Winter, 1988).
4. teachers' attitudes to teaching reading, peer tutor projects, and PR.
5. pupils' expectations.

A fuller discussion of these factors is presented in Winter (in press).

A study presently in progress in Hongkong hopes to reveal the effects of these variables upon project outcome. In addition it will look again at what happens during PR sessions, perhaps avoiding this time the defects apparent in the 1988 study. Until we have more data on this issue, there remains doubt regarding the true significance of training and supervision in PR projects, or indeed the significance of PR at all.

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