

Peers as Paired Reading Tutors

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Pupils from the peer group can be more effective as reading tutors than the parents of children with reading difficulties suggests Sam Winter, formerly an educational psychologist in Cleveland, now lecturer in educational psychology at Hong Kong University.

Soon after its development in the mid-seventies psychologists and teachers began to use paired reading, a simple tutoring technique for parents to use with children experiencing reading difficulties.

Paired reading projects have become so common that it is difficult to keep track of even those that have been set down on paper. In a recent review of such projects I discovered that over 30 reports written by 17 different senior authors were available, all but two of them dating from 1982 onwards. The researchers were invariably teachers and educational psychologists. The children, a total of around 500, were drawn from primary, secondary and special schools and were aged between six and 14.

Project findings were invariably that the majority of pupils benefited from parent-tutored paired reading. Over periods lasting between one and 12 months children were found to make gains in accuracy and comprehension, as well as becoming more confident and interested in reading as an activity. Average gains in reading age were typically four to five times greater than the duration of the project. Where control or comparison groups were included gains were found to be much smaller than those under paired reading. Parents found the technique comprehensible, easy to learn and fairly easy to apply with their children.

A massive literature is now available to demonstrate the effects which peer tutoring can have, both upon tutee and tutor, throughout the age range and across a number of subject areas. Tutees often feel more comfortable being helped by other children than by teachers or parents. Tutors gain a sense of worth and responsibility that may have been absent hitherto (particularly if they are themselves 'remedial' pupils). Both tutors and tutees typically make substantial academic gains and become more interested in the subject matter concerned. Where a tutoring project involves a majority or all of the pupils in a class, one may even observe a change in classroom atmosphere away from competition and towards cooperation and helpfulness.

Teachers in the United Kingdom have traditionally been reluctant to employ pupils as tutors in any systematic fashion. Where peer tutoring has been employed at all it has usually been on an *ad hoc*, short term basis, without any special training for tutors, with very little monitoring or support during the tutoring phase and with no attempt to evaluate the effects.

In the first half of this article I would like to describe a number of projects (all undertaken in mainstream schools over the last two years) in which pupils were trained to act as paired reading tutors. The second half comprises a list of guidelines to be considered by any teacher or psychologist taking part in such a project.

The first project

The first reported peer tutored, paired reading project took place in the spring of 1984 when I was an educational

psychologist in Cleveland. It developed from a parent tutor project previously organised at the primary school concerned. One of its goals was to provide paired reading tuition for children whose parents had either been unwilling or unable to collaborate in the earlier project, and for those who had reacted unfavourably to receiving tutoring sessions from their parents.

The class teacher of one of the two, fourth year classes asked the year group if there were any pupils who felt that they needed help to improve their reading skills. Fourteen out of the 56 children responded positively. He then asked the remainder if any of them would like to volunteer to act as tutors, bearing in mind that they would need to learn a special tutoring method and then use it three times a week during break times over a six weeks' period. Twenty four children volunteered.

Each of the tutees was then asked to select a tutor from the list of volunteers. Several of the latter were left over, of course, and one then asked if he could be a tutee and select someone to help him. Consequently the project began with 15 pairs all of whom, not surprisingly, were the same sex. Those who volunteered to be tutees were without exception comparatively poor readers. A number of them had been receiving attention from the visiting remedial teacher for several years. Those who volunteered to be tutors were drawn from the entire ability spectrum. In one particular pair the tutor had scored slightly below his partner on a recent standardised test.

I trained the tutors to use paired reading techniques, summarised by the following rules.

Reading Together

- 1 Read aloud with your partner, letting him set the pace and sharing his/her book.
- 2 If your partner hesitates or makes a mistake then tell him the correct word, and make him repeat it before continuing.

Reading Alone

- 3 If your partner signals (perhaps by a knock) that he wants to read alone, then stop reading aloud and follow the story.
- 4 If your partner hesitates or makes a mistake whilst reading alone, then tell him the correct word, make him repeat it, and then read aloud with him until he next signals.

At All Times

- 5 Whenever your partner reads a difficult word or sentence, corrects his own mistake or signals he can read on his own, then praise him.

Tutors listened to a description of paired reading, watched a demonstration with a volunteer child acting the role of tutee and then practised the technique with their partner whilst the teacher and I went round the class, monitoring performance and offering constructive feedback. After the practice session tutors were given a handout summarising the five rules described above and a simple record sheet upon which tutors were asked to record the page number reached at the end of each session.

Tutor-tutee pairs worked for three 15-minute breaktime sessions per week for six weeks, during which period there were no unjustified absences by either group. Whenever circumstances made a session impossible for a particular pair, time was made up later. Each pair therefore completed 18

sessions, representing 4½ hours of tuition, all of which took place in an ordinary classroom.

After the project had ended all 30 children were invited to take part in a discussion which focused upon their experience of both paired reading and peer tutoring. Tutees said they preferred to be helped by classmates rather than by teachers or parents. A number argued that they could read better and learn faster alongside fellow pupils. Tutors indicated that they had enjoyed being placed in a responsible position. Some added that the reading they had done alongside their tutees had been to the benefit of their own reading ability.

The class teachers reported gains in reading skills, as well as confidence and interest in reading, for a number of pupils who took part in the project. One reported that some of his pupils seemed a little more confident in other subject areas and that the atmosphere in his class was more harmonious than previously in that academic year.

Form B of the GAP reading comprehension test, administered immediately before and after the project, confirmed the pupils' and teachers' reports of reading gains. Tutees made an average gain of three months (from a mean reading age of 9:11 years to one of 10:2 years). The GAP test is a Cloze task requiring the insertion of short, simply spelt words which have been omitted from eight paragraphs of increasing difficulty.

The situation for tutors was complicated by the fact that five scored at the ceiling of the GAP test at pre-test and therefore were unable to make test gains no matter how much their reading might have improved during the project. When these children's results are removed we find that the average gain for the remaining 10 was eight months (from a mean reading age of 10:10 years to one of 11:6 years).

Perhaps the most interesting evidence of positive effects upon reading comes from data we collected for tutees only on their reading fluency under 'natural' conditions. Before the project began each tutee was asked to read a short text (about 200 words) chosen so as to be moderately difficult for the child in question (an error rate of between five and 15 per cent). The child was told that he should read aloud, should try to read difficult words himself and that any word he felt he could not manage would be supplied *on request*.

At the end of the project each tutee was asked to read the same text again (plus a completely unrelated text of the same Mugford readability level) under exactly the same conditions. The Mugford Chart is a relatively sophisticated measure which considers word length (in terms of letters and syllables) and sentence length in a sample of 100 words.

Every pupil's performance was taperecorded to make possible the subsequent calculation of four important scores. These were: **a** the child's reading rate, in words per second; **b** the child's error rate, as a percentage of words read; **c** his self correction rate, as a percentage of errors made and **d** his request rate (for a word to be supplied), as a percentage of errors made.

We found that tutees were able to read faster at post test on both the repeated and equivalent texts. There were generally fewer errors (for some children a reduction of around 50 per cent on the unrelated text) and where a mistake was made it was

more probably self corrected. Requests for help fell at post-test to zero for many tutees. The picture is one of children not only better able to read but also more confident in their ability to do so.

GAP test scores, together with reports from the teachers involved and from the children themselves, indicate that tutors gained as much as did tutees, a common finding in peer tutoring research. The particular factors that might have combined to produce this effect in a paired reading project are hard to isolate. It may be that when average or poor readers are given an opportunity to act as tutor they reevaluate their attitudes regarding their reading abilities, perhaps concluding that 'I'm not so dumb at reading after all' or something very much like it. The tutor is forced either to read aloud or to follow silently every part of the text covered by his partner, examining each word or phrase, checking that the tutee's responses match the letters on the page, the sense of the sentence and the tutor's own responses. Consequently, it may be that paired reading provides the tutor with an opportunity to refine, and possibly develop, vital text reading skills in a very similar way to the tutee.

Second project at same school

In a second project run at the same primary school Alan Low trained a group of 11 fourth year pupils to act as tutors to a similar number of tutees from the same year group. This time tutoring sessions took place for 15 minutes daily, during class time, over a period of one complete term. Tutoring therefore totalled around 18 hours, a rather higher figure than earlier. Results indicated correspondingly greater gains in reading age averaging 11 months for the tutees and eight months for tutors.

Third project

A third, but rather less successful, example of a peer-tutored paired reading project comes from Gale and Kendall (1985), who taught four primary school pupils, aged seven to nine, to use paired reading with classmates. Gains in accuracy and comprehension (as measured by the Neale Analysis of Reading Ability) were generally quite modest (three to four months over an eight-week project period) with the exception of the comprehension scores of tutors (which rose by a mean of eight months). Whilst the small number of pupils taking part makes these findings difficult to interpret it should be borne in mind that tutors in this project were *not* encouraged to praise their tutees for desirable reading performance and that a critical component of paired reading was therefore absent in this study.

Questioning the origins of reading gains

In all three projects so far mentioned doubt is bound to linger regarding the nature of the gains in performance obtained. It is possible that pupils scored better on post-test either because of a *test practice effect* or, where a *supposedly equivalent form* was used, because the second test was easier. These doubts apply both to standardised tests and to reading fluency texts as used in the first study. Even if one accepts that the gains represented real changes in reading ability, there remains the question of how they were brought about. Were they, as we might hope, due to peer-tutored paired reading or were they due to some other aspect of the projects? It may be that reading gains for tutees and tutors alike stemmed simply from the fact that both were engaged in several hours of additional reading over a number of weeks, and that the precise methods of reinforcement, modelling and error correction employed by the tutor mattered not at all.

Several studies address these questions. Lyn Free and others (1985) taught more able remedial pupils (reading age above 10 years) to use paired reading with their less able fellow pupils at a secondary school. After five weeks of tuition the 24 tutees were found to have made reading age gains substantially greater than those in a pre-project baseline period. Cawood and Lee (1985) trained sixth formers to use paired reading with 22 secondary slow learners on a daily basis for 12 weeks. Gains were nearly three times above 'normal' and were greater than those made by pupils in a control group receiving no special treatment. Results from these studies suggest that gains made in paired reading projects are more than test practice effects. However they do *not* indicate the extent to which gains are due to paired reading rather than either extra attention or extra reading practice experienced by children during these projects.

A recent project by Crombie and Low (1985) focuses on this remaining question. Working once again in a primary school, they split 24 third and fourth year junior tutors and 24 first year tutees into two groups, each with 12 tutors and 12 tutees. The two groups were matched for reading ages on the Neale Analysis of Reading Ability. In the first group tutors were trained to use paired reading techniques, and were then asked to provide one to one tuition with a tutee. In the second group tutors were asked to listen to a tutee read and provide whatever help they could. Each group of tutors worked with its tutees for 15 minutes a day, five days a week, over a period of six weeks. Tutees therefore received around seven hours of tuition, whether 'paired reading' or 'listening', during the period of the project.

Results from a retest on the Neale Analysis of Reading Ability suggested that, whilst tutoring had a very similar effect upon tutors and tutees, the size of that effect depended greatly upon the tutoring technique employed. Pupils who gave or received paired reading tuition averaged an accuracy gain of nine months and a comprehension gain of 11 months. By comparison, the figures for children in the 'listening' group were four months and six months respectively. Test practice effects, as well as any general effects stemming from several hours of cooperative reading, should have been equal for each group. The superior gains made by pupils involved in paired reading may therefore be the result of the tutoring technique employed – paired reading.

In passing, it may be of interest to note that two particularly poor readers in the tutee group had been receiving help from a visiting remedial teacher. One of them was being considered for possible placement in a school for children with learning difficulties. Soon after the end of the project these children obtained scores on NFER reading tests that ranked sixth and 12th (out of 24 children) respectively. Their tutors during the project were the two poorest readers in the fourth year group!

Advantages of peers over parents

Taken together, the peer tutor projects described suggest that paired reading can be as easily and effectively applied by pupils as by parents. It is clear that the technique can be taught within one or two short sessions to children as young as 10 or 11 years of age. With appropriate monitoring and feedback tutors can use the technique with partners of the same age or younger. Both tutors and tutees appear to become better and more confident readers. Reports suggest a positive impact on other subjects and even upon classroom social climate. Whatever role

they play, pupils appear to enjoy being involved in a peer tutored paired reading project.

Such findings suggest that the benefits of peer-tutored paired reading may exceed those of parent tutoring. In particular, peer tutoring brings about gains for the tutors and appears to have an effect upon the social atmosphere of the classroom, neither of which is likely for parent tutored paired reading. Consequently the time may be ripe for schools using paired reading to consider mounting peer tutor projects on similar lines to parent projects.

The questions to ask

The organisation necessary for a successful peer project compares closely to that for a parent project. It may be helpful to list some of the questions that teachers and/or psychologists need to ask themselves when planning to use children as paired reading tutors.

1 How many pupils of what type are going to be in the project? Will they be drawn from one or more classes, and from one or more year groups? If you are planning your first peer tutored project then you may be wise to draw both tutors and tutees from one class – from your own if you are a class teacher, from that of the most supportive teacher if you are a visiting professional with responsibilities towards the school.

2 How will children be selected to act as tutors and tutees or, for that matter, to be involved in the project at all? Will you allow children to volunteer and select their own roles, as occurred in the first study of the three described in this article? Alternatively will they be selected by the teacher(s) concerned, either subjectively or on the basis of recent test scores? Will you ask each tutor to work with one tutee or will you expect each tutor to work individually with a number of tutees during the course of a week?

3 How will tutors be assigned to tutees? Will tutors decide whom they will tutor or will tutees choose their tutors as in one of the projects described earlier? Alternatively, will the teacher(s) involved make the selection? It may be wise, as a way of enhancing commitment to a first project, to allow tutees (or possibly tutors) to choose, and to retain powers of reallocation for use in the event of any disruptive or nonproductive pairings.

4 How long will the project last? How often will the sessions take place? How long will each session last? On the one hand sufficient paired reading should be provided to produce academic gains. On the other hand one does not want to risk tutors and tutees losing interest. A project with 15-20 minute sessions, three to five times a week, over a one to three months' period, seems reasonable enough, at least for a primary school. If interest persists (and the imaginative teacher should be able to think of a number of ways of maintaining it) then the project could be lengthened or perhaps re-run after a period of rest.

5 At what time of day, and where, will sessions take place? As far as possible there should be a regular time and location for tuition. The headteacher of the school concerned (and possibly the classteacher[s] involved) may initially want a peer tutored paired reading project to take place during break times, when space for tuition may not be a problem. Whether or not sessions take place during break or class time, space may be limited. If so several pairs may be placed in a single room. During the first project described earlier all 15 tutors

conducted their sessions simultaneously in a regular primary classroom. We preferred this to the other option available to us, that of staggering the tutors' timetable.

6 How, where and by whom will your tutors be trained in the use of paired reading techniques? How, when and by whom will their performance be monitored and supported? A class teacher, remedial specialist or visiting psychologist may be able to provide the necessary training. Whoever does so, he or she should have first hand experience of using the technique.

The most effective training sequence for primary pupils may be a variant of that commonly used in parent workshops: group instruction, demonstration with a volunteer child, a practice session with tutees during which feedback is provided, a handout summarising the rules of paired reading, and the record sheet (if any) to be completed by tutors. The entire sequence may be completed in one 45-minute session.

Monitoring and feedback during the practice session are essential. During this portion of the training session it may be necessary for two or three people to split the group, depending upon the numbers of pairs to be observed. Among the commoner problems demanding constructive feedback are **a** tutors reading at their own, not the tutee's, pace; **b** tutors failing to praise desirable reading behaviours; **c** tutors attempting to use phonic-type methods to help the tutee read. Periodic monitoring of performance during the project may also be necessary. Tutors may appreciate having easy access to someone able to offer support and answer questions during tutoring sessions.

7 What materials are to be made available for the project? How easily accessible will they be for pupils? Paired reading projects always generate a need for a plentiful supply of books. It may be necessary to make arrangements for pupils to have free access to a library of books, perhaps amassed for the specific purpose of the project. Local remedial reading centres, teachers' centres and school library services may be able to help here.

8 What evaluation methods do you plan to use? Do you want to obtain communicable evidence of gains in reading ability? If so then you should select an assessment technique that is relevant to the type of reading skills being encouraged. Standardised reading tests, always most convenient to apply, are likely to be relevant only where the ability to read and understand meaningful texts is measured. Do you want to make sure (or convince others) that the reading gains obtained are both real and also the result of the techniques employed? If so, then you should carefully consider employing some sort of experimental design (perhaps by adding a group of pupils who receive some other form of help, on the understanding that they will become involved in a later peer-tutored paired reading project). Where necessary, a psychologist should be able to offer advice in this difficult area.

9 What steps do you intend taking to inform other members of staff, parents and even children about the planned project? Who among them can you ask for active support and collaboration on the project? How can responsibilities be divided? The more classes taking part (even indirectly), the more members of staff who should be supportive of the project. The fewer supportive people, the greater is the need for some sort of evaluation and subsequent dissemination – of test

scores, reactions of tutors and tutees, effects upon classroom atmosphere and so on.

Conclusion

The failure of teachers and psychologists to extend their paired reading work into peer tutoring is to some extent understandable. The amount of effort required to plan and supervise such a project is considerable, as is obvious from the above paragraphs. The common belief is that tutors gain nothing from peer tutoring and that it is a waste of their time. Many teachers and psychologists assume that only the 'brighter' children can act effectively as tutors and that their time is better spent learning than teaching. Anxieties are commonly expressed about parental objections, based on the view that if this sort of project is necessary the teacher cannot be doing his or her job properly – indeed that it is some sort of easy option for the teacher.

I hope this article has shown that peer-tutored paired reading is not an easy option but that, if properly planned, and implemented, it results in outcomes (social as well as academic) to the benefit of the pupils concerned. The benefit extends to some of the less able tutors, who often turn out to be among the more effective in their role. All things considered, the gains may be worth the effort.

References

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