

***Reading in Pairs* Programme: How Students Can Improve EFL by Working Cooperatively**

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Abstract

Reading in Pairs is an educational programme based on peer tutoring to improve the reading and speaking skills in English as a foreign language in Primary and Secondary schools, particularly from 10 to 14 years old. It is promoted by GRAI (Research Group on Peer Learning) of the UAB (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona).

The programme organises students in pairs and makes the most of the difference in ability of the members, so that both learn from each other. One of the student acts as the tutor, the person who helps their partner by facilitating the learning process, and the other fulfils the role of the tutee, who learns from the help offered by the tutor.

It has been developed by 35 schools in Catalonia from 2014 to 2016 with the support of the Departament d'Ensenyament de la Generalitat de Catalunya, collecting evidence of the programme's effectiveness in reading and speaking competence in EFL and introducing sustainable innovations due to the programme materials and the teacher's training.

Background and objectives

The *Reading in Pairs* programme (Duran *et al.*, 2016) is based on the previous experience of GRAI in similar programmes designed to promote reading skills in Catalan (Flores & Duran, 2016), Basque and Spanish. Over a ten-year period about 300 schools, 1500 teachers and 30,000 students have developed these programmes.

The main objectives of these programmes are:

- Promoting instructional methodologies for inclusive education. Peer learning, and peer tutoring in particular, allows for experiencing diversity as a positive value: it is the difference (in this case between tutor and tutee) by which we learn.
- Developing new forms for language teaching. Peer tutoring and family support can complement the performances of language-skill teaching and learning that commonly occur in our classrooms, building spaces for personalised aid with high levels of oral interaction in schools, but also at home.
- Improving the reading competence, and especially reading comprehension, of students. This systematic use of comprehension strategies can help to meet the challenge noted in the latest PISA report — that all students must reach a sufficient level of reading ability for lifelong learning.
- Fostering cooperation among students. Cooperation is a key competence in today's knowledge society and is, in itself, a valuable competence that develops social skills and basic attitudes for democratic life.

- Promoting the involvement of families in school activities and increasing the range of opportunities for participation. After a brief training session, parents have the possibility to tutor their sons or daughters in reading at home.
- Offering teacher training models based on peer learning among colleagues and working in teacher's networks.

Conceptual bases

This section reviews the four conceptual elements on which the *Reading in Pairs* programme rests — peer tutoring, reading and speaking in EFL, family involvement and teacher's network —, basing them on psychopedagogical research and educational knowledge.

• Peer tutoring

It is known that peer tutoring is based on people from similar social groupings helping each other to learn and learning themselves by so doing (Topping & Ehly, 1998).

In *Reading in Pairs*, peer tutoring is understood as a peer learning method based on the creation of pairs of students with an asymmetrical relationship (derived from the adoption of the role of tutor and tutee respectively) and a common objective, known and shared, which is achieved through a relationship framework planned by the teacher. These pairs can be organised in fixed or reciprocal roles and with the same or cross age. Tutees learn because of the adjusted and permanent help received from tutors, and tutors learn because teaching can be a good way of learning (Duran, 2014).

In addition, research valuing the effectiveness of peer tutoring (Topping, 1996) points out that this method increases academic efficiency, social skills, work habits, and a positive attitude to the academic world, while also promoting a high level of satisfaction and decreasing the rate of academic failure.

• English as a foreign language

Providing students with a high quality EFL education has become an important goal of most education programmes in Europe. In line with the recommendations of The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001), *Reading in Pairs* adopts the communicative approach to develop oral language skills. This approach promotes the creation of circumstances in language lessons that approximate genuine communicative contexts. The *Reading in Pairs* programme contributes to this field that follows the three relevant strategies to help students improve their oral English as pointed out by Jarauta and Imbernón (2012): increasing exposure time and language use, having high expectations and prioritizing oral use.

Reading in Pairs also promotes active listening through the use of conversations that go beyond a single question-and-answer interaction, which is often the only possibility they are given in traditional radial structures.

Regarding the way of approaching reading comprehension within *Reading in Pairs*, it is important to know that each session of the programme is centred on an authentic text. Each text is presented as an uninterrupted unit, and students work on it as a whole. Students work first on understanding the entire text and then concentrate on the grammar or vocabulary they do not understand.

Moreover, and no less important, the structure of the sessions promotes the internalisation of effective reading techniques. Students get used to making predictions before reading the text by looking at its title and main features, which highly influences comprehension (Smith, 1987). They also practise several reading strategies defined as relevant by Solé (1992): focusing on essential information, evaluating the consistency between text content and previous knowledge and paying attention to their comprehension level while reading the text.

- **Family involvement in school activities**

The third component of the programme focuses on family support in reading carried out at home. Studies in different geographical contexts (Martínez, 1992; Nailing, 2010; Ofsted, 2001) conclude that when families participate and collaborate actively with the school, their children increase in academic performance because they feel the continuity between home and school and, in addition, the school improves its quality of teaching.

But, as is known, facilitating family participation is not an easy task. In this sense, it seems urgent to provide families with resources through strategies for stimulating and supporting their children in learning and education, with the aim of favouring the creation of family environments that promote the development of positive attitudes towards learning and the generation of expectations of school success (Martínez, 2004). Wolfendale and Topping (1996) collected studies that demonstrated the positive influence on school performance that the collaboration of members of the family (parents, grandparents or siblings) had when learning from home.

It is necessary to break down barriers, to believe in the potential of families and to establish a framework of respect and trust, and, for sure, this work corresponds to the school. With *Reading in Pairs*, families can collaborate effectively in specific homework and be more active. They can contribute positively to their children's learning, an opportunity that teachers cannot waste.

- **Teachers' and schools' network**

The *Reading in Pairs* programme is based on peer tutoring among students and also among teachers. In this sense, GRAI has devised a system of teacher training that promotes peer learning at three levels: among students, among teachers and among schools working in a network to implement the programme. This is a coherent system understanding that cooperation can be established in both teaching and learning.

Many research studies and experiences confirm the efficiency of teachers' collaboration and the usefulness of a networking structure to enhance the implementation of peer tutoring in classroom.

The *Reading in Pairs* network is established as a workspace among schools in order to provide training and support to teachers who develop the programme in their classrooms. The network is intended to support innovation and ensure its success by joining the repertoire of usual educational activities.

The network is based on peer learning among teachers, because teachers who work together reflect on their practises, generating learning. Teachers are at a similar level of knowledge and their learning practises swing from cooperation to peer tutoring. Such networks (Katz & Earl, 2010) can generate spaces where teachers create knowledge, test it in the classroom, and evaluate and disseminate it to promote substantial and guaranteed changes in the students' learning.

The proposed training model shows consistency with the conviction of the effectiveness of peer learning practices, whether it is students, or teachers and schools who overcome the difficulties of incorporating cooperative learning practices into classrooms in a sustained and effective way (Sharan, 2010). Research, in this sense, demonstrates the need to move towards teacher training models that support real changes in the classroom through the implementation of innovations based on learning processes between teachers and institutions.

Programme description

This section describes the most significant aspects of the programme.

- **Training for teachers, students and families**

The programme requires an investment in the training of teachers and the participants (students and families) in order to ensure the correct functioning of the different stages within the programme and, particularly, to give students a highly structured framework of relations between tutors and tutees and the characteristics of each role.

The teacher's training is based on a mix model combining three face-to-face sessions and work in a virtual classroom. The training usually is done over the course of three years with two teachers from every school every academic year working in networks with the commitment of the head teachers.

Talking about the programme in schools, teachers have to determinate the number of initial training sessions. The programme suggests three, and here you have an example of the organisation of these three sessions. The first session could be organised around an introduction to peer learning and its benefits for both members of the pair. To promote commitment and responsibility in tutors and tutees, students could express the attributes they value in both roles and the ones that the group agrees upon and could be listed on a sign on the wall. The second session could be focused on the structure and the tasks per session. For the third session an explanation of the assessment plan is suggested. In this last session, teachers usually administer the initial assessment which will allow them to pair the students appropriately and can also be used as indications of improvement when compared to the final assessment.

Regarding the training for families, a single session of initial training is suggested. This is followed by a second meeting to assess performance once they have done several *Reading in Pairs* sessions with their children. This session is generally done with all the interested families together, and its main goal is a brief presentation of the programme that includes modelling of the activities and explanation of the support materials.

- **Pairing students**

Before starting the programme in classrooms, teachers create the pairs taking into account the English level of the students and their socio-emotional relationships. There are several ways of pairing students, with each of them having advantages and disadvantages, and some may fit some schools' context better than others.

First, it is necessary to decide whether to opt for a cross- or same-age tutoring model. A cross-age tutoring model should be organised with students who differ by no more than two or three years.

This will ensure that the academic content is still relatively challenging for the tutor, therefore ensuring their progress in English and fostering motivation. In a cross-age tutoring model, students with the higher English level of each age group should be paired together.

Teachers can also choose a same-age tutoring model that can be either fixed or reciprocal tutoring. To organise the pairs of a fixed same-age tutoring, teachers divide the group of students into two halves (higher and lower competence). Again, they will pair the students with the highest competence in the first group with the students with the highest competence in the second group. This method of pairing helps maintain competence difference between the members of all the pairs. Teachers can also opt for a reciprocal same-age tutoring model in which students will swap roles every session or two. In this case, students should be paired with a classmate who has a very similar level of competence to ensure that both of them can perform each role. The preparation of the sessions will give the tutors the confidence to exercise their role.

- **Activities in tutoring sessions**

The *Reading in Pairs* programme suggests a thirty-minute session per week for fifteen to twenty weeks. The first step of each session takes place before the session starts. Tutors receive the *Activity Sheet* with the *Language Support* and its *Audio File*, containing the text recorded by a competent reader. Tutors should pay attention to intonation and pronunciation and be sure they understand all the vocabulary in the text and the activities. They are also expected to think about possible questions their tutees may have. This preparation can be done during school hours or at home as homework.

- Before reading.

During the first minutes, the pair explores the general characteristics of the text (format, title, structure, etc.) and the tutee is asked by the tutor to make a hypothesis about the content. There are continuous texts (comics, poems, songs, recipes, letters, stories, news, menus, rules of games, riddles, listings, etc.); discontinuous texts (plans, schedules, tickets, graphics, posters, maps, advertisements, fact sheets, flyers, tables, etc.); and multiple texts, which combine continuous and discontinuous texts. Tutor and tutee also explore their prior knowledge on the subject, which awakens their interest.



- Reading aloud.

The reading part of the session starts with the tutor reading aloud for their tutee, acting as a model of pronunciation and intonation. The tutor's task is facilitated by the previous preparation of the texts using the *Audio File*. Right after, tutor and tutee read aloud together, which gives the tutee an opportunity to imitate the correct pronunciation and intonation. Then, it is the tutee's turn to read aloud alone while the tutor applies the Pause Prompt Praise (PPP) Technique (Mc Naughton, Glynn & Robinson, 1987). This scaffolding strategy consists in pointing out the tutee's error and then waiting a few seconds to allow for self-correction. In cases in which the self-correction does not happen, the tutor is expected to offer one or several prompts. The correct answer is only given by the tutor when these hints do not work. The PPP routine always ends with positive reinforcement. During this third reading, tutees stop after each paragraph or section and paraphrase what those sentences were about. This helps the tutor determine if they need some support to better understand the content.



- After reading.

The second half of the sessions starts with the reading comprehension activities. First, the pairs talk about whether the initial hypothesis was fulfilled or not and what information in the text allows them to determine this. The following comprehension activities have various levels of challenge. The first ones ask the tutee to retrieve information from the text in different ways (filling out a table, finding explicit information, etc.). The subsequent questions require some interpretation, for example, an identification of the main topic, listing supporting evidence for some of the statements, etc. The last questions are guided towards reflection and evaluation. The pair may evaluate formal aspects of the text, or talk about related topics, connecting the content with their previous knowledge.

The *Activity Sheet* includes a range of comprehension activities that are as varied and rich as possible: closed- and open-ended questions, extracting main ideas, making schemes and inferences, connecting previous knowledge with the content of the text, etc. Of course, these activities can be adapted to the needs and preferences of the students.

- Expressive reading.

The last reading aloud of the text is done by the tutee and it is named “expressive reading”. At this point, when the tutee has a clear understanding of the meaning of the text, she or he should be able to do a more “natural” reading of it, focusing on pronunciation and intonation.

- **Pairs’ self-assessment**

Every four sessions the pairs evaluate their progress using a guide that the programme proposes and teachers and students negotiate and modify depending on their interests and needs. This suggested guide includes open- and closed-ended items that refer to the appropriate fulfilment of the roles and respect of the structure of the sessions. The self-assessment document can also contain goals that each pair has set for themselves in the previous self-assessment session.

- **Extra activities**

This activity routine has the advantage of facilitating the establishment of good work dynamics but the disadvantage of repetition. In some pairs, allowing decisions about the time to devote to each activity block may be enough to break any feeling of monotony. In others, this may not be enough. Thus, it is convenient to generate a series of activities that break sporadically with those of the script.

Some of these activities, which are called “extra”, may be derived from the tasks in the *Activity Sheet*. For example, the preparation of oral presentations may be allowed at the start of the next class along with regular work. From any concerns which appear in the pair’s self-assessment, tutors also prepare extra activities for the next session.

- ***Reading in Pairs at home***

As has been said at the beginning of this article, the involvement and participation of the students’ family members is an aspect that favours the students’ process of learning academic contents. In this sense, it is important that teachers be motivated when talking about participation in the programme so they can encourage parents to participate. Providing the families with guidelines on how to support their children proves to be an effective procedure.

However, involving families in school activities is not an easy task, especially when it involves a subject such as English, which many families may not be proficient in. Teachers should make sure that what is proposed to the students’ families is a set of achievable challenges which show their consistency and commitment throughout the process.

Some ways to participate are:

- Parents acting as their children’s tutors following the procedure in the *Activity Sheet*, which should be different from the ones used at school but following the same scheme and interactive pattern.
- Swap roles so that children become tutors of their family members.

- The programme offers a series of activities in English taken from different websites with the aim that children have continuity between the school context and home and that they do English activities when families find *Activity Sheets* difficult to follow.
- **Assessment**

The assessment of the progress of students who participate in the programme can be done by taking into account the information that comes from different sources. The following are suggested:

- Initial assessment. At the beginning of the programme, all students undertake a language knowledge test to assess the actual level of their linguistic competence. The results can be useful in creating pairs. The test has the same format as the *Activity Sheets* that students will work on in the programme, but in individual format.
- Follow-up of the paired self-assessment guideline. Following up on the agreements of every pair when they evaluate their academic progress offers valuable information on their progress to teachers.
- Observations of pairs through record keeping. The teacher observes the pair's performance helped by a grid, recording data referring to the tutor and the tutee, individually and as a pair.
- *Activity Sheets* made by tutors. Once students have seen enough examples of *Activity Sheets*, they develop two sheets to work on in the classroom with their partner.
- Final assessment. During the programme development, activities of some sessions can be used as continuous assessment. Likewise, with the sheet done at the end of the set of sessions, the individual progress of each student can be seen in comparison with the results of the initial test.
- Portfolio assessment. At the end of tutorial sessions, students will have to submit a dossier containing the ordered *Activity Sheets* that have been worked on. Individually or in pairs, the tutor will provide additional material by way of explanations and short reflections on improved curricular aspects. At the same time, tutees should provide activities that they have completed at home.
- Information that comes from family tutoring. For those students who also have used the programme at home with a family tutor, available information should be taken into account in overall student progress.

Initial results

This section presents the results of the initial implementation of *Reading in Pairs* in 27 schools throughout Catalonia and Navarra from 2014 to 2016. The main focus of the research is the evaluation of the programme's effectiveness in reading and speaking competence in EFL.

The Movers Cambridge Young Learners English Test (Cambridge, 2011) was selected to measure the improvement in reading comprehension and oral skills in EFL with a pre-test/post-test design without group control. The time between the two tests varied between 13-18 weeks depending on the school, with an average of 15 weeks.

The sample consisted of 974 students aged 11-13 and 35 teachers spread over 4 schools in Navarra and 23 in Catalonia. For the oral communication skills, a subsample of 288 students was selected.

The hypothesis for the study was a significant improvement in the measured skills, as measured by the *Movers* test (Cambridge, 2011). This was expected, given the opportunities for oral interaction in the programme and the academic benefits of peer tutoring that have been shown in previous research.

The pre-test/post-test analysis showed a significant difference in the reading comprehension section of the Cambridge Movers pre-test and post-test scores. All students, regardless of their role, had significantly higher results in the reading comprehension post-test. The students involved in reciprocal tutoring (i.e. experiencing both roles) show the largest improvement. As for the students involved in fixed tutoring, a similar improvement in tutors and tutees can be observed.

Regarding the oral communication section, a significant difference in *Movers* pre-test/post-test scores was also observed. The pre-test/post-test oral communication results show significant improvement in the fixed tutoring condition for both tutors and tutees. It is also observed that tutees show a higher increase in oral expression than tutors. Regarding the reciprocal tutoring condition, a t-test analysis showed less improvement compared to fixed tutoring, but it was also statistically significant.

To conclude, the pre-test/post-test results suggest that *Reading in Pairs* has an important influence on the development of reading comprehension, both in fixed and reciprocal tutoring and among tutors as well as among tutees. These results also indicate an improvement in oral communication skills for tutors and tutees that take part in fixed tutoring, and also in reciprocal tutoring. As a whole, the results in reading comprehension are strongly positive. Even though the lack of a control group prevents us from confirming a casual effect of the programme, the results are a solid indicator of the potential benefits.

Conclusions

The results of the initial implementation of *Reading in Pairs* show the potential of this programme for the development of reading and oral communication skills, falling in line with other research conducted in previous programmes such as *Llegim en parella* (Flores & Duran, 2016).

These results have been obtained using the differences among students; in other words, peer tutoring allowed them to experience diversity as a positive value and contributed to the development of inclusive methodologies in schools.

Some teachers point out specific parts of the programme that help students to improve in reading comprehension and speaking such as:

- The structure of the programme.
- Reading the text several times using the *Audio File* as a model.

- The significant use of oral EFL.
- The prior preparation to improve vocabulary and intonation.
- The active role of tutor and tutee.
- The positive work environment with students more confident in front of a classmate rather than in front of a wider audience.

Besides, students feel the responsibility for the role and the interdependence between them. Several teachers said that tutors provide adjusted aid to tutees, who ask the tutor about things they do not understand, and as a consequence both can learn and also improve in cooperation. However, sometimes tutors do not give time to tutees to try to solve their mistakes and have difficulty in finding clues to help tutees. It is important to reinforce this part because it is a way for both tutors and tutees to learn.

Regarding families, it was difficult to involve them. Only about 20% of the students' families worked with the *Activities Sheets* at home. It is necessary to reinforce the idea that teachers should encourage families to participate and give them support to do it.

Last but not least, teachers state that they can learn from their colleagues. They said that in the same school working with another colleague and having the support of other more expert teachers is important. They think that the visits among the schools are an example of peer learning among teachers and schools.

They also feel that they are part of the teachers' network and always have the possibility of being helped or of helping other teachers. In their opinion, this is a good way to introduce the innovations because they do not feel alone.

To sum up, *Reading in Pairs* could be an important and valuable contribution to the field of EFL education and needs to be improved upon through the research and the feedback that the GRAI group continuously seeks out and receives from the participating teachers, students and families.

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Biodata

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[Back to the table of contents](#)