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BRIGHTENING UP FL TEACHING IN AN
URBAN COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL

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Although concerns about the small numbers of pupils opting for foreign languages and the even smaller numbers of examination successes are not confined to difficult "inner city" schools, they are probably felt particularly acutely by foreign language teachers in these schools.

Hearing of such concerns and of concomitant dissatisfaction, if not demoralization, in the foreign language department of a comprehensive school in a nearby Educational Priority Area, researchers from the School of Education, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, met with the head, the adviser and the foreign language staff to discuss the possibility of a project in Peer Tutoring. It was suggested that, by asking older pupils to spend a few lessons tutoring younger pupils in French, the interest and motivation of the older pupils would be aroused. Furthermore, in the course of one-to-one tutoring not only would the tutors obtain valuable oral practice but it also seemed likely that, through teaching another, they would learn the work better themselves: "Docemur docendo". Perhaps most importantly, pupils would enjoy such an experience. An examination of the timetable revealed that fourth year French classes met at the same time as the first year "Pre-language" classes which introduce French culture and customs and a little vocabulary. A fourth year and a first year teacher agreed to work together to run a short peer tutoring project. It was understood that they would manage the project on their own with the University input being confined to collecting some evaluative data.

Questionnaires to pupils confirmed the difficult situation in which teachers found themselves. Table 1 shows the dislike pupils had for French, even in the first year of secondary school before they had actually studied the language. Over three quarters of pupils reported hating French and considering it a useless subject and this was so even among the small number of fourth formers who were actually still taking French. Not a single fourth form pupil indicated a wish to visit France and only 5 of the 37 fourth form pupils expressed a desire to do French in the fifth form, hardly a viable class size. These attitudes may be typical of pupils from low socio-economic status areas where foreign travel is still rare and there is no experience of jobs ever being related to foreign language skills. Whether or not these attitudes are particularly strong in the industrial north-east is a matter for conjecture.

Depressing as the attitudes to French might have been when taken at face value the results form a ranking of subjects by preference offered some comfort (see Table 2). French in fact fared better than other academic subjects when ranked in order of preference. Maths, Science and Humanities were even less liked. This slightly positive result for French could be viewed as a result of having administered the questionnaires in French classes but it must be noted that the results in Table 1 did not indicate any undue reticence to express negative opinions. It is clear, however, that craft subjects and P.E. fared best in the popularity stakes at this school.

Table 1: Attitudes to French

Positive Statements	Percent agreeing with statement	
	1st Formers N = 117	4th Formers n = 37
I enjoy French	10	11
French is a useful subject	3	3
Learning about France is fun	14	17
I would like to do French next year	17	14
I enjoy learning other people's languages	15	14
I would like to visit France	5	0
I would like to be able to speak French well	7	3
Negative Statements		
French is a waste of time	77	86
I hate French	79	77

Table 2: Average Ranks Assigned to Various Subjects by First and Fourth Formers

1st Formers (n = 115)			4th Formers taking French (n = 36)	
Subject	Mean Rank	Rank of Means	Mean Rank	Rank of Means
Craft (e.g. Woodwork or Domestic Science)	2.34	1	2.50	1
Physical Education (P.E.)	2.62	2	2.61	2
French	3.43	3	3.33	3
Maths	3.89	4	3.92	4
Science	4.08	5	4.42	6
Humanities	4.15	6	4.06	5

Note: A rank of 1 indicated "subject you like best", 6 indicated "subject you like least".

Planning the project

Clear simple exercises were selected by the teachers for tutoring. These involved French to English and English to French translation of five vocabulary areas: numbers from one to forty, days of the week, naming colours, telling time and the weather. It was important that these topics represented work which the tutors needed to learn or practice and which were suitable for the tutees. Pre-testing showed the tutors certainly in need of practice on these topics: they scored on average less than 50% on a 60 item short answer test prepared by the teachers for use in the project. There was one other fourth year French class in the school, a higher set, which when given the same test scored an average of 74%. Tutees, not having had formal instruction, had an average score of only 8%. These pre-tests were administered in November.

Following the initial measures of attitudes and achievement the tutoring project was implemented in six 70-minute lessons over a period of three weeks. Tutors spent 20 minutes preparing with their teacher, then tutored for 30 minutes and spent the final time discussing problems which had arisen. For the tutoring, half the pupils in the fourth year class went to the first year classroom and half the first year pupils went to the fourth year classroom. Thus each teacher supervised half of each class. Since the first year class had about twice as many

pupils as the fourth year class, tutoring took place on a one-tutor-to-two tutees basis. Tutees were assigned to tutors from rank-ordered lists, so that high-scoring tutors worked with high-scoring tutees. The main concern prompting this method of assignment was the need to avoid having a tutor faced with a tutee who was more able. The teachers decided to maintain a very light supervisory role, avoiding any interference with tutors during the tutoring sessions. Thus, for example, if tutors were heard mispronouncing words correction was only given after the tutees had left.

Results
Informal observations. The atmosphere in the rooms as pupils sat clustered in the small tutoring groups was one of serious activity: quiet talking, prompting and questioning. Various styles were adopted by the fourth form tutors. Some were relaxed and smiling, conversational, friendly, sitting beside tutees, while others adopted a more distant role, formal and severe, often sitting opposite the tutees and handing out work. (Future studies should examine whether the type of roles adopted by tutors affects the learning of tutees.)

Considering that each room contained about seven sets of three pupils each (a tutor and two tutees), all involved in teaching and learning, the atmosphere was remarkably hushed. Another dominant impression was of consistent, self-imposed attention to the task in hand. Teachers rarely had to prompt any group to work, and in fact sometimes took the opportunity of this autonomous tutoring activity to tidy the room and prepare materials. At other times they welcomed the chance to work individually with pupils. Since tutors were in teaching roles *they* kept order, mostly without assistance, freeing teacher to give uninterrupted individual attention. One teacher wrote:

> "Observing these groups at work was intriguing. The fact that you can opt out of your normal teacher role, wander around, watch and listen, means that it gives you a chance to re-examine your own methods and a chance to experience things from the first year pupil's point of view – you notice all sorts of sociological and educational points such as extreme dependence upon their peers among first year girls, or how certain pupils clearly feel insecure without pen and paper. I found it rewarding."[1]

The topic to be taught, and the resources available for teaching it, appeared to the teachers to affect pupils' behaviour during tutoring sessions. For example, for one of the topics (numbers one to forty) many concrete resource materials were available. The objective was taught with great earnestness and enthusiasm whereas application to the task in hand lapsed somewhat during the lessons dealing with "weather" for which there were few materials to support the tutors' efforts.

> "The last objective, weather, appears to have been the worst taught. I am certain that the reason lies in the total lack of resources available to the fourth year tutors. Lots of simple number games were possible, but weather was more restrictive and needed more materials."[2]

Test scores. The same objectives-based test which had been used as a pre-test was administered after the last of the six tutoring sessions. Tutors obtained an average score of 69%, almost up to the level of performance of the higher French set (see Table 3). Tutees obtained an average score of 48% which meant that after just six sessions of peer tutoring they had scored on average, as high as the tutors had originally scored. This was a remarkable average gain for tutees; more than half of them had gained between 40% and

80%. Some four months later, having occasionally encountered some of the topics which had been tutored but still having had no formal instruction except from tutors, tutees were given the same test again, unannounced. They achieved an average score of 50%, showing excellent retention. In short, in six lessons the tutees had learned the materials up to the original level of the tutors, a gain which was still evident four months later. Tutors improved during the six sessions almost up to the level of the higher French set.

Table 3: Average Scores on the 60 Item Objectives-Based Test

Group	n	Test	Mean Percent	Raw Mean	Raw S.D.
4th year Tutors (Low French set)	11	Pre[1]	48	28.9	11.26
	11	Post	69	41.4	9.58
4th year Comparison (High French set)	25	Pre	74	44.2	8.77
1st year Tutees (Pre language class)	23	Pre	8	5.0	6.06
	23	Post	48	28.7	16.68
	20	Retention	50	30.3	13.28

[1] Pretest given in November; Post test given in December; Retention test given in April.

Examined for reliability the teacher-made criterion-referenced test reached quite acceptable levels. For example, for tutor at pre-test and tutees at post-test internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) were 0.72 and 0.87 respectively. For tutors at post-test the coefficient was only 0.51 but this could be increased to 0.73 by standardizing the marks on each objective (i.e. on each topic). Test-retest measure of reliability were 0.79 for both tutors and tutees.

Pupils' attitudes to tutoring. The way peer tutoring links hard work on basic skills with pupil enjoyment is one of its most attractive features, but how to measure enjoyment is something of a problem for researchers. There is a general tendency to report positively on life's experiences and if you ask pupils if they enjoyed something they will generally say they did. In this project all but one of the tutors reported on a questionnaire that they enjoyed the teaching they did. A more telling question is one that seems to have implications or consequences, such as "Would you like to have tutoring as a term's course?" The response of tutors to this question was still clearly positive with all but two of the tutors responding 'yes' or 'definitely yes'.

Previous experience has suggested that tutors feel more positively about the tutoring experience if their tutees play an appropriate tutee role – listening, trying to learn, appear to like the tutor – and that the nature of the relationship between tutor and tutee is a major determinant of whether or not pupils wish to continue tutoring. Although numbers involved were small the same trends were evident here. The majority of the tutors reported that tutees tried hard to learn the work, behaved well, enjoyed the lessons and appeared to like the tutor. The two tutors who reported they would not like further tutoring, indicated on questionnaires that three out of their four tutees did not try hard to learn the work and did not learn much during the tutoring sessions. Unlike the majority of tutors, who reported liking their tutees, these two tutors were not sure they liked their tutees and furthermore did not think that the

tutees enjoyed the tutoring. It is worth noting that these two tutors reported that they did not preparation at home for tutoring sessions whereas the majority of tutors reported having regularly spent time at home preparing for the tutoring sessions. In the light of this lack of effort one wonders whether tutors provoked negative responses from tutees (in which case some appropriate pre-project training of tutors might alleviate the problem) or whether the small percentage of unsuccessful tutor-tutee relationships arose from tutee responses to the situation.

The first form teacher's comment on pupils' observed response to the project was:

> "Fourth year pupils took their roles very seriously and on the whole first years were interested, keen and in one case responded far better than in a whole-class situation. Most first years grew quite fond of their new 'teachers'."

Pupil attitudes to French. It will be recalled that negative pupil attitudes to French had been a major cause of concern. It was not really expected that a short project would alter attitudes to French, but as it turned out there was a statistically significant positive shift after the project in the ranks assigned to French by tutors. The comparison group, in contrast, which had not been involved in the project at all, showed a marginal negative shift. Table 4 summarizes these data, with the ranking assigned to humanities included for comparison.

Table 4: Pupils' Ranking of School Subjects in Order of Preference Before and After the Tutoring Project

Subject	Group	Mean Rank at Pretest[1]	No. not Changing	No. of Positive Shifts[2]	No. of Negative Shifts	Mean Rank at Post-test	Significance of Change[3]
French	Tutors	4.1	3	6	0	3.2	0.03
	Comparison Group[4]	2.9	10	2	6	3.3	0.07
	Tutees	2.0	12	3	7	2.2	0.20
Humanities	Tutors	4.4	6	1	2	4.6	0.79
	Comparison Group	4.0	13	3	1	3.8	0.20
	Tutees	4.9	10	5	7	4.9	0.99

Notes:
[1] The top rank "1" indicated "subject you like best" and 6 indicated "subject you like least".
[2] A "positive shift" was recorded when the subject was placed higher on the ranking scale, i.e. it had a smaller number associated with it, showing greater liking for the subject.
[3] Wilcoxon's matched-pairs signed ranks test.
[4] The higher French set in the same year group (4th) as the tutors.

Discussion. The vast majority of school programmes in peer tutoring have been in basic skill areas – maths and beginning reading – and frequently in remedial settings. The reputation of effectiveness for peer tutoring projects spread rapidly among remedial teachers in the US, doubtless aided by the professionalization of remedial instruction there.   Training

programmes, conferences, journals, specialist posts in most schools; all these, added to funds for resources, prompted the interplay and communication of ideas and speeded the spread of innovations such as peer tutoring.

What chance is there that peer tutoring might be widely adopted in FL teaching? Any innovation which requires extensive in-service training may (unfortunately perhaps) have limited usefulness in schools. This pilot project demonstrated that a peer tutoring project was well within the competence of the teachers to plan and execute. The two teachers involved selected objectives, prepared the tests, trained the tutors and managed all the tutoring sessions. The test they created, constructed to cover their eight objectives, showed entirely acceptable levels of internal consistency and test-retest reliability and its content validity was beyond question.

Questions might be raised regarding the novelty and brevity of this project. Would the procedure become boring if used for a longer period of time and could the results be attributed largely to the "Hawthorne" effect? Here the important point to be made is that good teachers constantly *use* the Hawthorne effect. It is not, from the point of view of practising teachers, an undesirable effect to be avoided but an effect to be used as long as it works. If novelty adds to enjoyment and increases achievement, good teachers will seek variety in their methods of classroom instruction. From the research point of view the question of a Hawthorne effect is one of the generalizability and interpretation of the findings. Would repeated or constant use of tutoring result in no beneficial gains because all the gains were due solely to the novelty of the situation? There was no way in this project to disentangle the effects of novelty from the effects of tutoring, but it should be noted that if tutoring is used very much in the way in which it was used in this project – as a short, carefully planned unit built into the normal course of instruction – then the Hawthorne effect would probably arise each time, enhancing enjoyment and improving achievement. There are, however, persuasive reasons for supposing that tutoring is an effective procedure for enhancing learning quite apart from its novelty. It involves clearly defined objectives (tutors are shown precisely what to teach to tutees) active participation and verbalization and the strong reinforcement and motivation of working with a peer. A considerable number of research studies in other subject matter areas support its viability as an instructional procedure.[3] The particular usefulness of tutoring for foreign language instruction would seem to stem from the opportunity it provides for work on oral communication and on the strong possibility that its regular use could lead pupils to enjoy foreign language instruction more than they do at present.

Summary
In short, observations, achievement tests and attitude measure suggested that, in the undeniably difficult situation facing teachers in schools in depressed urban areas, cross-age tutoring in foreign languages may have a great deal to offer. If the methods adopted involve experiences pupils greatly enjoy, such as the cross-age interactions of a tutoring project, more pupils may persevere with language studies and reach higher standards, not least in communicative areas. There is a need now for more research, including carefully controlled experiments and longer term projects, fully evaluated.

An important and hopeful point to emerge from this pilot project is that teachers can run tutoring projects themselves. The researchers provided only the idea, some evaluation measures and encouragement.

References

[1] From a report written after the project by Mrs. J. Phillips, a teacher of the first year pupils.

[2] From a report written after the project by Mrs. J. Phillips, teacher of the first year pupils.

[3] See, for example, Allen, V. (1976) *Children as Teachers: Theory and Research on Tutoring*. New York, San Francisco, London: Academic Press.