

**THE GRADUAL RELEASE OF
RESPONSIBILITY IN LITERACY
RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

LITERACY RESEARCH, PRACTICE AND EVALUATION

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LITERACY RESEARCH, PRACTICE
AND EVALUATION VOLUME 10

THE GRADUAL RELEASE OF RESPONSIBILITY IN LITERACY RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

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FOREWORD

In 1983, P. David Pearson and Margaret Gallagher published *The Instruction of Reading Comprehension* Technical Report No. 297 through the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. This report formed the basis for the article by the same title published in the journal of *Contemporary Educational Psychology* the same year. Neither David or Meg (as they were known by colleagues) could have predicted how the gradual release of responsibility model of instruction would have such staying power over the coming decades. Given its ongoing relevancy, it is surprising that, until now, no volume has been devoted exclusively to the gradual release model, its history, and its future. This edited volume addresses this oversight and, for the first time, brings a specific examination and exploration of the gradual release of responsibility as a model applied to research and practice across a multitude of areas related to literacy instruction.

Now, many decades after publication, the model continues to appeal to researchers, teachers, teacher educators, curriculum specialists, and literacy specialists alike. It has been used, as originally intended, to consider the scaffolding necessary as children and teachers engage in reading comprehension tasks, but use of the model has spread to other developmental age groups and levels of instruction and to other content areas. From the genesis of the model to the present, the gradual release framework has been employed to explain numerous literacy practices from reading and writing with young children to reading and writing with adolescents. But the model has also been applied to the work of teachers who, as adult learners, are exploring how to teach reading, writing, and other content areas. Numerous curriculum specialists, literacy coaches, and school districts have adopted the model to help explain their instructional philosophy and approach to literacy instruction, and teacher education programs have employed the model as a general instructional framework for reflection or in ways as specific as a guide for lesson planning.

A brief Internet image search for the gradual release of responsibility returns numerous visual iterations of the models ranging from published models to hand-made teacher posters to commercial style graphic posters. There are even cartoon versions of the gradual release (two of which we share in Chap. 1). Clearly, the model depicting how teachers help aid in explicit instruction by gradually releasing responsibility over time resonates deeply with literacy practitioners and scholars alike. The chapters in this volume articulate the history, multiple iterations, applications, and staying power of the model and its conceptual origins across varied content and contexts.

The first chapter authored by P. David Pearson (with a little help from colleagues McVee and Shanahan) begins with a retrospective on the genesis of the

model and the context of reading research that prompted Pearson and Gallagher to attempt to map out a model of instruction that included both explicit strategy instruction alongside the idea of fading that explicitness or scaffolding over time. Contextualizing the model historically and conceptually, Pearson et al. present multiple iterations of the model as it has been presented by various scholars and teachers and also describe some essential elements of the gradual release. The 14 chapters that follow revisit the gradual release framework applying it to considerations of explicit teaching and scaffolding for emerging readers and adolescents, bilingual learners, and students who are deaf and hard of hearing. Authors consider the socially and culturally diverse context within which the gradual release of responsibility model can be used and its applications for adults, namely teachers, literacy coaches, and school leaders. Across the chapters, the authors explore not only reading but literacy as a social practice – and socially just practice – and literacy as inclusive of writing and vocabulary development, two areas where the model has been applied less often. In addition to reading, writing, and comprehension, research chapters in the volume explore how the model can be applied to understand school change, teacher reflection and coaching, and disciplinary literacies. The volume closes with a look back by Dole, Duffy, and Pearson who consider the historical evolution of instructional research on reading and how the model has evolved as reading/literacy research itself has changed. This final chapter also considers some common misuses or misinterpretations of the model and what can be done to avoid them. In sum, this text has something to offer those who first became aware of the model decades ago and those who are discovering it for the first time – a feat that speaks to the longevity and flexibility of this particular model.

CHAPTER 1

IN THE BEGINNING: THE HISTORICAL AND CONCEPTUAL GENESIS OF THE GRADUAL RELEASE OF RESPONSIBILITY¹

P. David Pearson, Mary B. McVee and
Lynn E. Shanahan

ABSTRACT

Purpose – The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the conceptual and historical genesis of the gradual release of responsibility (GRR) model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) which has become one of the most commonly used instructional frameworks for research and professional development in the field of reading and literacy.

Design/Methodology/Approach – This chapter uses a narrative, historical approach to describe the emergence of the model in the work taking place in the late 1970s and early 1980s in reading research and educational theory, particularly at the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana as carried out by David Pearson, Meg Gallagher, and their colleagues.

Findings – The GRR Model began, in part, in response to the startling findings of Dolores Durkin's (1978/1979) study of reading comprehension instruction in classrooms which found that little instruction was occurring even while students were completing numerous assignments and question-response activities.

Pearson and Gallagher were among those researchers who took seriously the task of developing an instructional model and approach for comprehension strategy instruction that included explicit instruction. They recognized a need for teachers to be responsible for leading and scaffolding instruction, even as they supported learners in moving toward independent application of strategies and independence in reading. Based in the current research in the reading field and the rediscovery of the work of Vygotsky (1978) and the descriptions of scaffolding as coined by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), Pearson and Gallagher developed the model of gradual release. Over time, the model has been adapted by many literacy scholars, applied to curriculum planning, used with teachers for professional development, reprinted numerous times, and with the advent of the Internet, proliferated even further as teachers and educators share their own versions of the model. This chapter introduces readers to the original model and multiple additional representations/iterations of the model that emerged over the past few decades. This chapter also attends to important nuances in the model and to some misconceptions of the instructional model.

Research Limitations/Implications – Despite the popularity of the original GRR model developed by Pearson and Gallagher and the many adaptations of the model by many collaborators and colleagues in literacy – and even beyond – there have been very few publications that have explored the historical and conceptual origins of the model and its staying power.

Practical Implications – This chapter will speak to researchers, teachers, and other educators who use the GRR model to help guide thinking about instruction in reading, writing, and other content areas with children, youth, pre-service teachers, and in-service teachers. This chapter provides a thoughtful discussion of multiple representations of the gradual release process and the nuances of the model in ways that will help to dispel misuse of the model while recognizing its long-standing and sound foundation on established socio-cognitive principles and instructional theories such as those espoused by Jerome Bruner, Lev Vygotsky, Anne Brown, and others.

Originality/Value of Paper – This chapter makes an original contribution to the field in explaining the historical development and theoretical origins of the GRR model by Pearson and Gallagher (1983) and in presenting multiple iterations of the model developed by Pearson and his colleagues in the field.

Keywords: Gradual release of responsibility; scaffolding; reading comprehension; strategy instruction; explicit instruction; modeling

INTRODUCTION

This book represents a long journey for the gradual release of responsibility (GRR) model since Pearson and Gallagher (1983a, 1983b) gave it a name in 1983. And we examine that journey twice in the current volume: (1) in this introductory

chapter – so readers can start their journey through the portfolio of current applications and adaptations of the model with a strong grounding in the developmental history of the model and (2) in the ending epilogue (in which David is joined by long-time scholars of reading pedagogy Jan Dole and Gerry Duffy) – so readers can join in a reflection about where the model has been, how it is working now, and where it still needs to go. First, however, an account of how it came to be.

Since its publication by P. David Pearson and Gallagher (1983a, 1983b), the gradual release of responsibility (GRR) model has become an influential and significant model in the literacy field (Duke & Pearson, 2002). David notes that the model is the single-most reproduced graphic from all of his publications, having been reprinted widely in chapters and articles by a variety of authors. The GRR has demonstrated a remarkable endurance, spanning decades, and increasing in use and application over time. The Ngram graph (see Fig. 1.1) demonstrates the increasing frequency of the term from 1983 to 2008 (the last date for which there is Ngram data).

Another interesting perspective can be found using Google Scholar. A search conducted at the beginning of 2019 turned up 217,000 hits for the term, “gradual release of responsibility,” in titles, articles, abstracts, books, chapters, and papers. The more restrictive term “gradual release of responsibility model” still yielded over 68,600 hits. A search of Google Images reveals hundreds of images of the GRR model including published versions, but also including teacher-made posters, captions for photos, posters for sale, and cartoons (and more) which indicates that the visual representation of the GRR is widely used, adapted, and shared.

Despite the longstanding use of the GRR framework, no book has been published that is exclusively devoted to the history of the model developed by Pearson and Gallagher (1983a, 1983b) and the application of the model in various aspects of literacy learning and education. As such, this edited volume takes up this charge, first exploring the history and evolution of the GRR (including some variations on the model), then considering how the GRR has been or could be used in various aspects of literacy instruction and research, and concluding with a look back reflecting across the volume and across the decades of work connected to the GRR (see Dole, Duffy, and Pearson, Chapter 16).

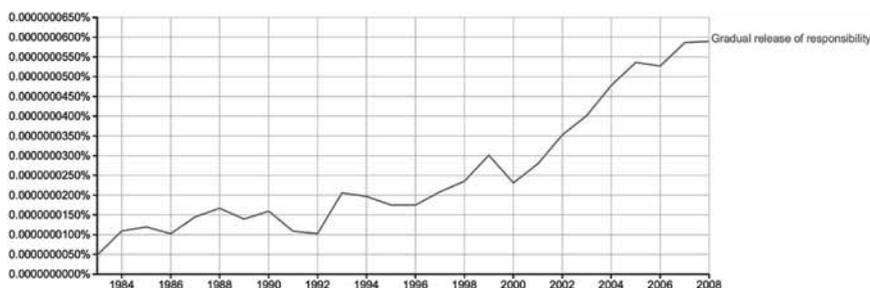


Fig. 1.1. Ngram of “Gradual Release of Responsibility” from 1983 to 2008.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE GRR

The Origins and Motivation for the Model

The model arose gradually (fittingly!) over time predominantly between the years from 1978 to 1983 as part of a search for a model of instruction that could demonstrate how explicit reading comprehension pedagogy could be used to assist teachers and schools in more effective instructional approaches to teaching reading comprehension. The search for a model to alter current instructional practice was precipitated, in part, by the startling revelations of Dolores [Durkin's \(1978–1979\)](#), now classic, study which had demonstrated that what was being carried out in schools under the guise of reading comprehension instruction was neither effective nor instructive.

In her examination of over 17,997 minutes of reading instruction in the intermediate grades, Durkin found that rather than teaching students *how* to understand, teachers were simply requiring students to answer questions in both small group and large group discussions and in assignments. Simply put comprehension instruction consisted of assessments and assignments: Teachers asked questions, and students answered them. The assumptions in this widespread default approach are (a) that students can answer the questions teachers ask them about the texts they read and (b) if they cannot, they will improve their question-answering abilities if teachers just increase the amount of question-answering practice they provide for students. The irony, of course, is that this approach simply perpetuates, perhaps even exacerbates, and the gap between those who can and those who cannot answer questions successfully in the first place. More practice allows those who *can* to refine their good practices and those who *cannot* to refine their maladaptive practices. In other words, “Practice makes perfect, if you’re already pretty close to perfect.” But, Pearson and his colleagues were looking for an alternative to the “practice makes perfect (or imperfect)” model of pedagogy. For Pearson and several of his colleagues (all but David were doctoral students when this quest began), including Jane Hansen ([Hansen, 1981](#); [Hansen & Pearson, 1983](#)), Christine Gordon ([Gordon, 1985](#); [Gordon & Pearson, 1983](#)), Taffy Raphael ([Raphael & McKinney, 1983](#); [Raphael & Pearson, 1985](#); [Raphael & Wonnacut, 1985](#)), and Meg Gallagher ([Pearson & Gallagher, 1983a, 1983b](#)), the GRR model emerged gradually through work undertaken during time at the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois.

The Collegial Scaffolding

Fortunately for Pearson and his colleagues, others at the Center for the Study of Reading in the early 1980s shared their concern and their quest for more effective pedagogy and for ways to describe how children could be supported in reaching comprehension of text that was just beyond their grasp alone. Most important, David and this group of emerging scholars encountered the work of Ann Brown and Joe Campione, who were using a [Vygotsky \(1978\)](#) perspective to conceptualize instruction. For Brown and Campione, learning occurred in zone of proximal development (ZPD) – a space in which students encountered the helpful support

of “more knowledgeable others,” who could assist students in progressing from what they can accomplish *on their own* to what they can accomplish *with a little boost* from their friends or teachers. It was Brown and Campione who introduced David and his colleagues to another student, Annemarie Palincsar, who was conceptualizing a dissertation (which led to the now famous pedagogical routine known as reciprocal teaching) dealing with these very issues (e.g., [Palincsar & Brown, 1984](#); [Palincsar, Brown, & Martin, 1987](#)).

Equally as important, Brown and Campione introduced the group to the work of [Wood, Bruner, and Ross \(1976\)](#) and their recently coined construct of scaffolding and to the dynamic assessment practices of Reuven Feuerstein ([Feuerstein, Rand, & Hoffman, 1979](#)). Along with Brown and Campione’s pedagogical research, the constructs of scaffolding and dynamic assessment were driven by the then recently rediscovered Vygotskian socio-cognitive views of learning and development ([Vygotsky, 1978](#)), particularly the ZPD. Scaffolding provided a powerful label for what it is that the more knowledgeable others could and should do when working in the ZPD. And dynamic assessment turned out to be a prescient way of thinking about what has evolved into formative assessment ([Black & William, 1998](#)). The key element in dynamic assessment changes the questions researchers and educators ask about assessment. Assessment is no longer merely a measurement of how a child performs in comparison to the norm of similar children. Instead, in a dynamic assessment frame, assessment is viewed as an index of what a child can do when provided with different levels of “scaffolding.” Therefore, the question is not, “Can a child do X?” Instead, the question becomes, “Under what conditions of scaffolding can a child do X?” This question is soon followed by, “How can a teacher, or more knowledgeable other, fade the scaffolds over time to lead to completely independent performance?” It is worth mentioning that these Vygotskian concepts are now familiar concepts to many teachers and scholars, but at the time, these works were recent additions to the literacy landscape and had not yet been applied broadly in practice or research.

The Visual Model

The visual model of the GRR evolved over time in conversations with Meg, Taffy, Annemarie, Joe, and Ann as they attempted to find good ways of depicting what the teacher’s role and what the student’s role was. Joe actually had a precursor visual representation that had displayed something like the distribution of volume of task responsibility – what proportion of the responsibility pie is each takes. And one day, the idea came to David in a noontime conversation – it was just like the classic guns and butter production function curve he had learned about in Econ 1-A at Berkeley in the early 1960s. If it was possible to conceptualize society’s priorities as reflecting various combinations of producing food (i.e., butter) versus arms (i.e., guns), it was possible to conceptualize comprehension task completion as requiring various combinations of student versus teacher responsibility: the more teachers do, the fewer students do and vice versa. That is how the idea of plotting teacher responsibility on the Y-axis and student responsibility on

the X-axis originated. As soon as David drew a picture of it (see Fig. 1.2), it all made sense to everyone.

Of course, in those pre-PowerPoint days of the early 1980s when computer-generated graphics were not readily available, the visual did not look so polished. The original, literally sketched out by David on a napkin during lunch, resembled the depiction in Fig. 1.3.

Another step in the development of the GRR model occurred in 1983 when David and Meg Gallagher wrote a piece for *Contemporary Educational Psychology* entitled, the “Instruction of Reading Comprehension.” Serendipitously, a companion piece published in this same volume is the now classic article, “Becoming a Strategic Reader” (Paris, Lipson, & Wixson, 1983). David and Meg’s 1983 article included the original published version of the model, complete with an acknowledgment to Joe Campione for inspiring its creation (see Fig. 1.3). According to Google Scholar, this article has become David’s third most-cited publication, and as noted earlier in this chapter, the GRR model published in 1983 has become the figure that David receives the most requests from authors and publishers to reprint (Fig. 1.4).

During this period, David and his colleagues continued their development of the GRR because even as they started using the model, they realized it had a lot more nuance to it than was implied by the simple model. In 1985 David wrote the first of many synthesis pieces on reading comprehension research, this one for *The Reading Teacher* entitled “Changing the Face of Reading Comprehension” where David wrote:

I would like to propose a new model...a model in which the teacher assumes a more central and active role in providing instruction, a model in which practice is augmented by teacher modeling, a guided practice and substantive feedback, a model in which the teacher and child move along that continuum of task responsibility [the Gradual Release of Responsibility], a model that says just because we want students to end up taking total responsibility for task completion does not mean that we should begin by giving them total responsibility. (Pearson, 1985, p. 736)

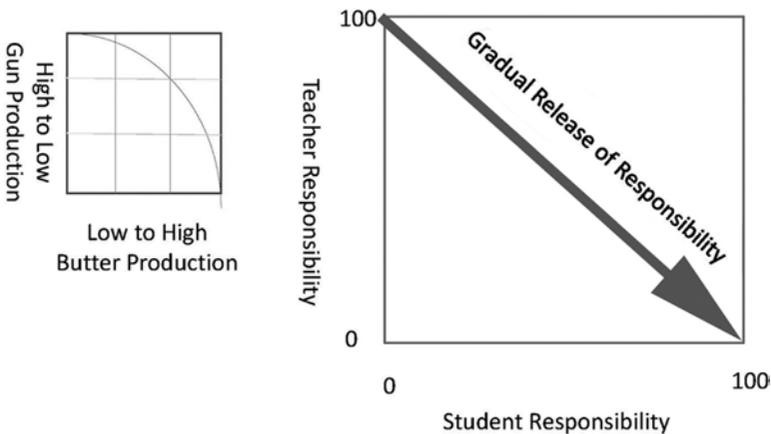


Fig. 1.2. How Guns and Butter Inspired the “Gradual Release of Responsibility.”

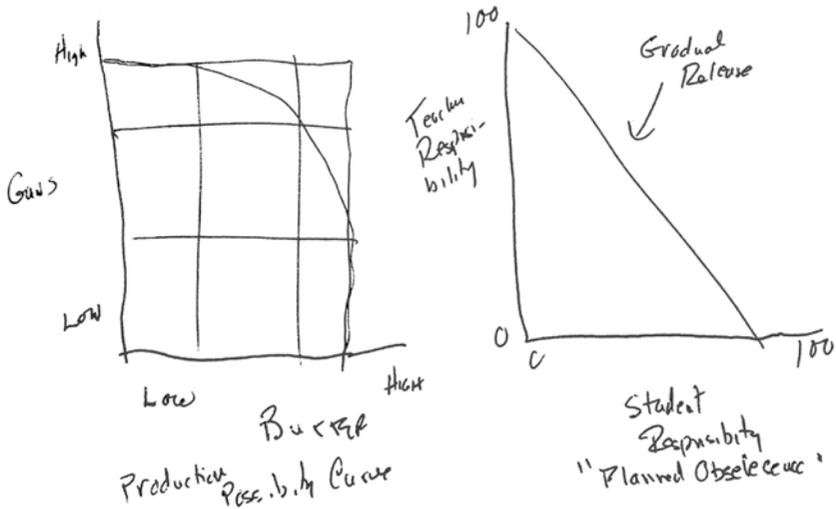
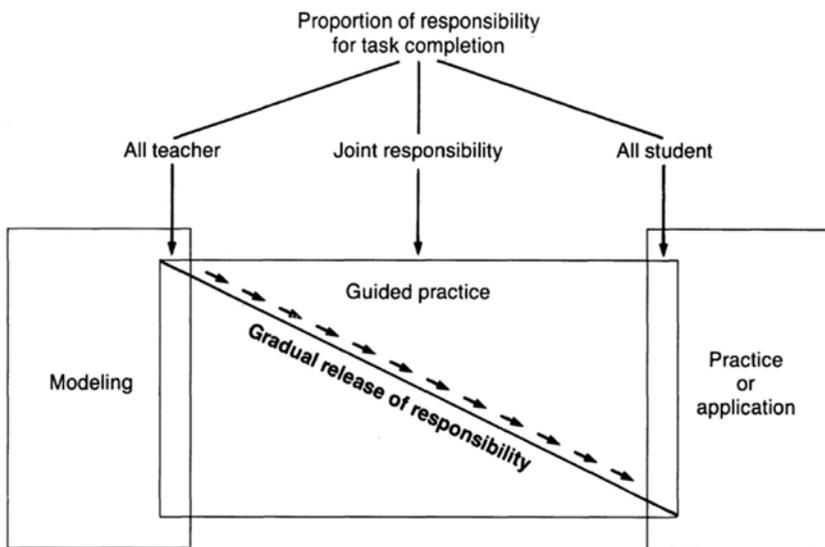


Fig. 1.3. Facsimile of the Original Visual Depiction of the Gradual Release of Responsibility (circa 1981 by P. David Pearson).

The gradual release of responsibility model of instruction



From Pearson and Gallagher, 1983, after Campione, 1981.

Fig. 1.4. The Original Published Version of the GRR Model in *Contemporary Educational Psychology* in 1983.

In this article, David also unpacked the GRR more fully by illustrating the specific roles played by teachers and students in the work of Christine Gordon (Gordon, 1985; Gordon & Pearson, 1983) on drawing inferences and Taffy Raphael (Raphael & McKinney, 1983; Raphael & Pearson, 1985; Raphael & Wonnacott, 1985) on question–answer relationships (QARs). As Hansen, Gordon, and Raphael instantiated the GRR in pedagogical experiments with teachers and students, they became more specific about what teachers did and what students did. Table 1.1 illustrates just how the gradual release was carried out in the work of Gordon and Raphael.

THE GRR MODEL

Over the years, the model has evolved and been adapted by other scholars and educators and has been applied in new ways. But some of the key concepts from the model have survived across the decades. Among those concepts are *Modeling* (where the teacher – or another student – demonstrates how to do the task), *Guided Practice* (where the teacher and the student are sometimes jointly and sometimes separately responsible for enacting different steps in completing the task), and *Independent Practice* (where the teacher has, at least for the moment, completely released responsibility to the student(s)). We added a stage of *True Ownership* to Raphael’s QAR work because the goal was ultimately to have students generate questions. Think of true ownership as a kind of “hyper-independence.”

Table 1.1. Distributing Task Completion Responsibility in the Gradual Release Model.

Stages of Task Responsibility in Gordon’s ^a Inference Task				
	Ask Question	Answer Question	Find Clues	Share Reasoning
Modeling	T	T	T	T
Guided practice	T	T	S	S
Guided practice	T	S	T	S
Independent application	T	S	S	S
Stages of Task Responsibility in Raphael’s ^b QAR Task				
	Ask Question	Answer Question	Assign QAR	Justify QAR
Modeling	T	T	T	T
Guided practice	T	T	T	S
Guided practice	T	T	S	S
Independent application	T	S	S	S
True ownership	S	S	S	S

T = Teacher responsibility; S = Student responsibility.

^aAfter Gordon & Pearson (1983).

^bAfter Raphael and Pearson (1985).