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# Operant Tool Conditioning As A Tool For Reading Remediation

by Elaine E. Cherney, Michigan State University

In recent years a great deal of interest has been expressed in the application of conditioning principles to the prediction and control of human behavior. (Wenrich, 1970, p5.) It is the purpose of this paper to discuss operant conditioning as a tool for reading remediation.

Operant conditioning is a process in which the frequency of occurrence of a bit of behavior is modified by the consequence of the behavior. It is concerned with the relationship between the behavior of the organism and its environment. (Reynolds, 1968, p. 1) While the operant responses seem voluntary, when the variables that are functionally related to a specified operant are identified and manipulated, the behavior under consideration can be predicted and controlled. (Wenrich, 1970, p. 6) One of the most important single concepts of operant conditioning is positive reinforcement. (Wenrich, p. 38.) A positive reinforcing stimulus may be defined as any stimulus which, when it follows a response, will increase the strength to maintain the occurrence of that response. (Wenrich, p. 38) One can condition a completely new response through shaping, that is by selectively reinforcing closer and closer approximations of the criterion response and by extinguishing those of a lesser approximation. The behavior maintained through reinforcement can be additionally modified by changing the schedule of reinforcement.

According to Bond and Tinker (Bond and Tinker, 1967, p. 241) the complexity of the reading act, the nature of reading difficulties, and the many characteristics of child growth and development that have a bearing

on reading success make it clear that no two cases of disability are exactly alike. They state further that the remedial teacher studies the diagnostic findings and then arranges a learning situation that will enable the child to grow in reading at an accelerated rate. (Bond and Tinker, p. 241.) Thus the use of operant conditioning as a delivery system for remediation would enable the teacher to set the environment for modification of the improper responses.

Research in the field of operant conditioning in remediation tends to support the view that this can be an efficient way of handling remedial reading problems. Ryback and Staats (Ryback and Staats, 1970, p. 110) used a token-reinforcer system with parents as tutors to treat reading deficiencies. While the sample was small and only one treatment group was used, the researchers did indicate that they felt the method was effective. This was a continuation of research begun by Staats in 1959. Blau (Blau, Schwalb, Zanger and Blau, 1969, pp. 649-653), using a sample of 12, indicated that modality blocking and non-vivual AKT method could be used to remediate developmental dyslexia. Blau suggests that learning and especially learning to read may be cut off or interfered with by the visual modality. (Blau, p. 253.) Raygor describes the use of operant conditioning in developing speed of comprehension on college students. (Raygor, 1964, p. 65.)

Since operant conditioning is contingent upon the setting up of an environment that permits the instructor to modify behavior, the instructor or remedial teacher must diagnose the problem thoroughly, decide on the

terminal behavior desired, analyse the task to be learned, develop the proper steps toward obtaining the terminal behavior and then set up the correct learning environment. Additionally, the learner must know what terminal behavior is expected, what must be attended to, and how the learning is to be reinforced.

To sum up a model for the use of operant conditioning as a tool for reading remediation should include:

1. the terminal behavior stated in objective terms
2. an analysis of the learning task
3. the steps for the learning task
4. an initial experience that will provide instant positive reinforcement
5. pre and post testing
6. constant immediate feedback for the learner
7. good instructional contingencies.

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