

## Oral Fluency in Music

For my term project, I have chosen to study oral fluency in reading music. This topic is very intriguing for me because reading music simply cannot be done unless there is significant fluency. A music student may be able to name all of the notes on the staff, label all of the rhythms, and even describe the song in relation to speed, rise and fall, emotion, volume, etc, but unless they can translate all of these elements into a performance of a selection, they have not actually performed the song correctly. In traditional reading, if you miss a word, slow down to sound out a word, or pronounce a word incorrectly, you could still possibly understand the story or passage and grasp the overall concept of what you are reading. In music, if you skip a “word” (note or rhythm), or “slow down” (drop tempo), “mispronounce a word” (sing the wrong note or rhythm), etc, you have changed the song and therefore have not sung the correct song. In a sense, when this happens, the singer sort of creates their own song, which is not the intention of the composer(writer). In music, you cannot afford to “read” a passage incorrectly, otherwise you turn it into an entirely different “story”. Without total reading fluency, a singer will have to have a knowledgeable musician, an instrument that they can play fluently, or a recording of the song nearby to help you learn a song correctly. In music, you either perform the song with 100% accuracy, or you don’t; there is no gray area, it is black and white (Standard I).

I selected two choir students: Zach and Cain. Both of these students are eleven year old males, just finished sixth grade, and are in the beginning stage of their music reading abilities. They are caucasian, English is their only language, and neither have any learning disabilities. They both started the year in general music during the first

quarter. In general music, students learn about a wide variety of musical concepts such as reading notes, rhythms, understanding basic concepts of written music, instrument families, musical genres, form, singing, etc. These two young men were so interested in music, particularly in singing, that they joined choir for the second quarter and stayed until the end of the year. Choir focuses a lot more on singing technique and written music concepts that can be used for sight-singing, composition, and dictation exercises than general music does, so when they entered choir during the second quarter, they were slightly behind the other students who had been in the class for nine weeks already. Although they started behind, they both quickly excelled in the area of singing and in the area of reading music and became leaders in my classroom within a very short period of time (Standard III).

In my classroom, students have some sort of sight-reading activity every day. All of the activities are teacher-led, either with my voice as tonal anchor, or the piano. Almost always in sixth grade it is my voice because everyone is singing the same musical line. In higher grades, students begin to break into two parts, so I will use the piano a little more to play both parts. The current climate is very supportive and caring. Students are not afraid to make mistakes because they know that I will not be upset with them if they do. I actually tell them that if they make a mistake, it better be a big one, so that we can hear it and find a way to fix it! Students know that sight-reading is a team effort, just like singing music for a concert is. A weak link, in terms of effort, will hold the entire group away from being successful. Because of this, my students are always ready to give their best every single day (Standard IV).

At this level, the goal of sight-reading is to promote group independence from the teacher, not individual independence. In the sixth grade, it is very difficult to sight-read without any support systems, so the majority of the work done in the classroom has to be group oriented. During voice tests for sight-reading, the students are allowed to sing in a group of two to three people that they choose and trust. This helps reduce the anxiety levels, but there are very few, if any, that do not feel at least somewhat nervous about the situation. Some are so nervous that sound will not even come out of their mouths (Standard II).

There are a few reasons I selected these students. First, they are both very interested in learning about music and singing, so I knew they would be excited to work with me on the project and spend more of their free time after school gets out to learn. Additionally, both of these students began taking private voice lessons from me during the third and fourth quarters. I met with these students once a week for a half hour for the past four months, so they were comfortable singing for me on their own. However, the voice lessons consist primarily of vocal technique instruction to improve their vocal strength, so little is done to improve sight-singing skills. This project time would be new and refreshing for them, while at the same time helping to improve their singing abilities. The greatest challenge that the students faced during the project was having to sight-read music for the teacher by themselves. It is an entirely different situation than simply singing a song during voice lessons, but because they were used to doing that already, sight-reading was a little less stressful (Standard IV).

Both boys have lovely singing voices, but there is a significant difference between them that affects their sight-reading abilities. Zach struggles to sing anything

without a tonal anchor (myself singing along with him or the piano playing along with him). In class and in voice lessons, he struggles to stay on pitch, whether we are warming up, practicing tonal memory, or singing a song that he does not know very well. When he knows a song very well, however, he has a great sense of pitch and is very confident in his abilities and he projects well. That is why he is a great leader in choir: he learns the songs quickly and he has a great tonal support system in the other members of the choir and the piano accompaniment. The struggle he has with sight-reading is that there can be no external supports. He is given the starting pitch and then from there has to sing the entire selection on his own. Cain, on the other hand, does not really need any tonal anchor. In fact, I am suspecting that he may have something called “perfect pitch” because I can ask him to find a note and he is usually spot on with singing the pitch without *any* tonal reinforcement. He has a great sense of confidence and singing on his own does not make him nervous, it makes him excited! The process of sight-reading seems very simple to him, but sight-reading alone is still nerve-wracking for almost anyone. Even music teachers who have to do it get nervous (Standard III)!

In music, the beginning stage of sight-reading involves reading passages that are step-wise. This means that the notes move between each other without any skips or jumps and all notes are next to each other in a scale. There are three options for where the next note could go: one step down, one step up, or stay the same. Because of this, students focus on seeing, hearing, and singing whether a note went up, down, or stayed the same. Once they increase their ability to see, feel, and hear how notes move between each other in this step-wise motion, they greatly increase their ability to sight-read beginning passages because the options of what the notes could be less are

severely limited. Rhythmically at this level, students focus on 2/4, 4/4, and 3/4 signatures. Rhythms include quarter, half, dotted half, whole, and their rest equivalents. These are the basic rhythmic structures that they are focused on throughout middle school (Standard II).

For both my pre-assessment and post-assessment, I used a variation of the OFR-CBM assessment in order to find the area of sight-reading that each student was struggling with. In other words, find what sort of mistakes that each student makes in the sight-reading process so that the instruction during the lessons could focus on strengthening those areas. My students sight-read a short passage of music (which is provided for you in the supplemental files). While the student read (sings) the passage, I marked errors as they occur. These errors included singing a wrong pitch, singing a pitch out of tune, singing a wrong rhythm (holding a note for too long or not enough), singing a wrong solfege syllable to match the note, increasing or decreasing tempo, or skipping a note or rest. The students have been reading short passages like this one in class, but as a group, so this was the first time that they had an opportunity to sight-read alone. This same process was used as the post-assessment, but the musical passage was different (Standard V).

The pre-assessment that Zach took showed me exactly what I was expecting. He had a really difficult time staying in tune without any sort of tonal support. He was often very close to the notes, but they were not entirely centered (a little too high=sharp, a little too low=flat). When one note is not centered, the likelihood that the following notes will be centered is low as well. He had some difficulties matching the pitches with their corresponding solfege syllables as well. One strength that he did exhibit was that he

tried not to stop and slow down the reading process while singing. He kept going in tempo, even if he made a mistake. Rhythm is half of the issue because singers must be careful to not hold the notes for too long or not long enough, especially when singing with a piano accompaniment. He struggled a little bit to hold the correct rhythmic values, but overall, this area was okay. He totaled eight errors which puts him in the primary one level of sight-reading examples. (Standard III).

The results of Cain's pre-assessment found that he has a great strength in staying in tune. This is the complete opposite of Zach, which I expected. He was a pretty good beginning sight-reader on his own. He never faltered with knowing his solfege syllables and he had a great sense of how the notes moved between each other (up, down, stay same). Much like Zach, he did not struggle with the tempo, but he did struggle with how long he was to hold the note a few times. Overall, Cain has a strong grasp on beginning sight-reading, but there are a few things that need to be solidified before we move on to more difficult passages. He totaled three errors which puts him in the primary three level of sight-reading examples. (Standard III).

As a result of these pre-test measures, I compiled a lesson plan tailored to help them increase their sight-reading abilities. Zach would be working on sight-reading passages at the Primary I level (passages in 4/4 time with step-wise motion within the five note tonic triad range- Do, Re, Mi, Fa, Sol, La, and back down, with quarter notes, half notes, whole notes, and no rests), while Cain would be working on sight-reading at the primary III level (passages in 3/4 time with step-wise motion using the tonic triad range of notes mentioned above, but there are quarter rests and dotted half notes added). The main goal of the lesson was to help solidify common pitch patterns

according to their individual reading levels. This includes hearing, singing, and seeing the pitch patterns isolated. This goal is a step toward the underlying goal of reaching a stage of automaticity and increasing decoding abilities in recognizing and performing pitch and rhythmic patterns at the beginning level (Standard V).

According to Kuhn and Stahl 2003, “the primary components of fluency are (a) accuracy in decoding, (b) automaticity in word recognition, and (c) the appropriate use of prosodic features such as stress, pitch, and appropriate text phrasing” (p. 5). While reading music, it is incredibly important to have all three of these standards present and functioning in order to have 100% accuracy. “Fluency in reading depends on attaining a high level of automaticity of word recognition, so that cognitive resources can be directed primarily toward parsing, analyzing, and interpreting the structure and meaning of connected text” (Scarborough and Brady, p. 325).

Decoding or word recognition, “is the foundational process of reading” (Archer et al, p. 90). Therefore, decoding and automaticity go hand-in-hand because music readers cannot take the time to figure out pitches and syllable names because it will slow down the rhythm of the song and essentially change the song from what is written. According to Chard et al, “slow word reading is also debilitating because it consumes working memory” (p. 386). If decoding takes up the brain functions, students do not have enough attention to give to the most important area of prosody.

Once these skills are in place, the brain can use its energy to work on prosody. The essence of music is in the prosodic features including, “pausal intrusions, length of phrases, appropriateness of phrases, final phrase lengthening, terminal intonation, contour, and stress” (Kuhn & Stahl, p. 5). These details provide students with an

opportunity to make meaningful musical experiences. Without which, students would be, “glued to the print and unable to delight in the reading of text” (Chard, p. 402).

Word study is incredibly important because it helps to break down the process of reading into smaller, more attainable reading goals. When students can read small pitch words or patterns, they can read through larger musical sentences to find greater patterns. As Moats describes, “as whole words, morphemes, and print patterns become increasingly familiar, knowledge of these larger units of print allows students to read efficiently and spend less and less attention on sounding words out letter by letter” or in musical terms, note by note (p. 2-3). Students need to learn incrementally in order to fully understand the basis of the reading structure in music.

Learning small parts first and then advancing toward putting those parts together into larger and larger sentences and phrases involves a great deal of planning. This type of systematic instruction, “leaves little to chance” according to Moats (p. 5) and it emphasizes the reading of words that, “have specific spelling patterns or letter-sound correspondences” because connection to the ear is critical (p. 6). This link between the sight of the pitches and its sound is incredibly important for memory retention bond: “The most effective way involves bonding the letters to the word’s pronunciation held in memory so that sight of the word immediately activates its spoken form and meaning. Letter-sound correspondences are the tools that the mind uses to for the bond” (Gaskins et al p. 315).

The Archer article described how a method introduced students to small syllables and then slowly increased the amount of syllables (p. 93). The technique of saying the parts, then saying the whole word, and then making it a real word is a significant



method used in this lesson. In music we sing individual syllables, then we sing pitch patterns combining three to four syllables and then we find a song that has that particular pitch pattern in it and we see it in context to promote meaning (p. 94). (Standard I and VI).

The first part of the lesson that I presented required students to echo-sing a variety of pitch patterns (three to four notes). I would sing the pitches using the solfege syllables and then they would echo what I sang on their own. When working with pitch patterns in this way, they do not have to be step-wise. In fact, it is more helpful to practice patterns that have a mix of steps and skips. It is much like the theory that basketball players who practice shots from all over the court will be better free-throw shooters than the players who only practice free-throw shots from the line. The second part of the lesson worked with the students' listening abilities. I would sing pitch patterns on neutral syllables and then students would have to tell me what solfege syllables they think I sang by singing the pattern back on solfege syllables.

The third part of the lesson required students to participate in a point-and-sing activity. There are five stages of this activity. Stage One: Begin by writing the solfege syllables from Low Do up to High Do in a vertical line. Using this "chart", I point to solfege syllables in patterns (much like the ones used in the first part) and they sing as I point, always starting on Do, Mi, or Sol. After the students get the handle on this stage, we move to the second stage. In the second stage, I draw circles around the solfege syllables and we repeat the process of stage one. After a few pitch patterns, I erase the solfege syllables from within the circles for stage three. Now, instead of seeing the

solfege syllables, they must remember where each solfege syllable went. I point to the circles and they sing the syllables that were in the circles before.

For the last stage, I draw lines through the circles that represent the notes C, E, G, B in order to show a correspondence to the notes that would be on a line on the staff. The last stage requires students to sing the notes as if they were placed on the staff. For the last stage, I rewrite the scale on an actual staff horizontally rather than vertically. We do the same point-and-sing exercise, but it is horizontal, which is how we read text and music.

The critical moment that I had in Zach's lesson occurred when he made the connection in stage four between the staggered vertical solfege lines and empty circles to the actual staff with notes. He gasped out loud and brought his hand to his head in disbelief when he saw that what he was singing were actually notes. It gave him a lot of self-confidence because he knew that he had been singing the point and sing exercised pretty well, but he was concerned to transfer to the written music. When we added the lines, everything seemed to click and he realized that he could be successful at this task (Standard III and V).

The critical moment that I had in Cain's lesson occurred when he began to notice that he could see the pitch patterns he was hearing in his head as if he were looking at them on the staff. This is an absolutely critical component of reading music. When you hear something aurally, being able to envision what it looks like on the staff is an incredible strength. It is something that I still have not fully developed. His ability to do this in the sixth grade is a wonderful sign that he is going to become a strong musician in the future if he continues to work and practice the craft (Standard III and V).

By comparing the results of the pre and post-test measures, it is clear that the lesson had an impact on the students' sight-reading abilities. Zach's pre-test score showed eight errors, which is a very high number and his post-test showed only three. This is a decrease of five errors in just one day! Cain's pre-test resulted in three errors and his performance in his post test showed only one, which was a rhythmic inaccuracy! This is only a decrease of two errors, but Cain was sight-reading at a higher level than Zach. From looking at the post-test measure results, the actual lesson itself was successful in improving their sight-reading skills, so it can be generalized that if we were to continue working together in this fashion, their sight-reading abilities would continue to improve (Standard V).

Although the lessons went very smoothly and the results showed significant improvement, it is unfortunately too early to tell how successful the lesson actually was. The most difficult aspect is that they will not be able to practice this exact sight-reading process at home on their own without a knowledgeable musician present. Even though Cain can read well without a tonal anchor, he still needs to sing through warm-ups prior to sight-reading in order to get a sense of the tonal center. He is not at a level where he can do this on his own with 100% accuracy, so leaving this to his own skill may lead to the development of aural skills that are out of tune. Zach should definitely not practice this process on his own, either, because he does not have a strong sense of pitch and tonal center, which will likely lead him to develop poor pitch pattern habits. Fortunately, there are a few websites that I gave them that have interval games, pitch pattern play backs, and basic theory exercises that they can practice over the summer. These will help them to increase oral and aural awareness, but like I stated before, there are

currently no websites that have full sight-reading passages that can be practiced with a tonal anchor. Next year, these strategies will be implemented into the course in seventh grade and we can use them to reinforce skills at the group level and then after a period of time, students will be tested to see the impact on their sight-reading abilities (Standard III).

If I were given another opportunity to change something, I would probably have had them work together for a lesson day. Research has shown that, “children’s reading competence improves when they work with each other in a cooperative and structured manner” (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005, p. 34). Because the lessons that I taught involved a low performer and a higher performer, they could have combined their knowledge and skills to help each improve. PALS is a partner reading strategy that I would look to use in the future. In this process, students take turns facilitating the role of “coach” and the stronger reader is always the coach first. “The coach points to a letter and prompts the reader to say its sounds. if the reader makes a mistake or does not know the sound of a letter, the coach uses a correction procedure. When the reader has said all of the sounds, the coach marks a happy face on the lesson sheet and also marks five points on a point sheet. Then, partners switch roles and repeat the activity (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005, p. 39). The reading that the partner would work on would be pitch patterns. Lengthy reading samples would be too difficult to check pitch. I would of course be there to monitor just in case they need assistance as a tonal center. (Standard VI).

I did not have to worry about behavior or active participation and interest because they are both wonderful students and they absolutely love to work with music in anyway! For my testing measures, I would like to use more than one passage and

compare. By only allowing them to sing through one passage for their pre and post-tests, I do not believe that it was a particularly reliable test because their nerves were likely influencing their success to some degree. By having them sing a few different pre-test passages, the students will get more comfortable and hopefully feel a little more relaxed with the later examples that they read (Standard V).

In the case of Zach, I would have focused a little bit more on tonal memory, which is the process of singing something that you have just heard. If I sing a short pitch pattern, he struggles to sing back exactly what he heard. This is problematic for the process of sight-reading because when you are reading, you are really hearing the pitches in your head before your mouth sings them. If a student has a difficult time translating what they hear into what they sing, the process will be much slower, affecting the critical components of decoding and automaticity. In relation to Cain, I would have likely increased the difficulty level of the passages because he is a very strong reader for a sixth grade students. I would have some passages that focused on skips rather than only having step-wise motion. His performance clearly showed that he was capable of such, but I wanted to keep the instruction consistent between the two participants by focusing on step-wise motion rather than skips. In the curriculum, students in middle school do not start working on skips until the middle of seventh grade, so I did not want to push him to a level that was too difficult and intimidating (Standard III).

If I were to have more time with both of them, I would have liked to discuss more of the prosodic features of sight-reading. Middle school students do not look into this area of fluency until the end of seventh grade and sometimes eighth grade, depending

on the performance level of the class, because students must have dynamic automaticity and decoding skills before they are able to have enough working mental capacity to add this component onto the the already difficult task of note and rhythm reading. However, if we were to have more time, I could have added some simple dynamics (loud or soft) and had them perform the sight-reading examples, adding them as they go (Standard V).

Overall, the lesson was very encouraging, both for myself, and for the students. They could both see through their performance on the post-test that they improved their accuracy. They also seem to understand on an even greater level how important reading fluency is to the process of music. They understood it a little bit before through the classwork, but now that they were able to have an experience singing on their own, they realized that you truly must know your notes, rhythms, and intervals in order to be successful and not rely on the other members of a group. The group effect is very deceiving because some students are wonderful sight-readers in groups, but when they get on their own, it is an entirely different ballgame. I think that next year, I am going to experiment with working on sight-reading with students individually as least a few times throughout the year, rather than in groups of two to three. I know this may make them a little more nervous, but they will be that much better for taking the risk and allowing themselves an opportunity to improve at the individual level. Individual level reading is the most important lesson that I will take away from this assignment and this course. My coursework in college and my experiences in singing have always been geared toward group performance in sight-reading, but if you can find a way to work on the individual level, the results simply cannot be refuted (Standard I).

Discussion Board Response:

I work with two different students on increasing their music sight-reading abilities. The lesson focused on automaticity and decoding strategies that could be used and applied across grade levels. The pre-test measures had one student singing in the lowest primary level, but after the lesson, this student was singing in the second highest primary reading level. The second student was quite successful in both pre and post testing, placing him in the second highest level for the pre and then the highest level for the post. The results of my lesson showed that using a direct instruction method of enhancing decoding and automaticity skills can improve the sight-reading abilities. Even a short intervention, such as this one-hour lesson, can have a great impact on the increase of understanding and ability in this area. The results suggest that if this process was continued over a long period of time, the subjects would continue to see high increase of ability levels in this area.

The greatest question that emerged was how you can bring the same ideas into the classroom while working with 20-30 students at a time. This lesson focused on meeting the individual strengths of the singer, but in a classroom, the ability levels of the students could range from very little to quite proficient in the levels of sight-reading that are done in this grade level. It would be greatly beneficial to take this lesson to the classroom and somehow change it to offer individual, partner, and group segments and then bring it all together as a choir as we perform and sight-read our choir songs.