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Andrew Johnson
University of Minnesota

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I Was a Less Able Reader: What Concert Choir Taught Me About Reading Instruction

Andrew Johnson

What does it feel like to be a less able reader — to attempt to decode and process text when everyone around you seems to be much more advanced than yourself? What strategies might be used to help less able readers decode and process text in a symbol-sound system? This study uses participant-observer research methods to elicit answers to these questions. As a graduate student at the University of Minnesota studying literacy education, I needed to find an instance where: a) I was a less able learner, and b) I was involved in the process of decoding in a complex symbol-sound system. There are many similarities between reading words and reading music (Flemming, 1988). Thus, I auditioned for and participated for two quarters in the University of Minnesota concert choir. This experience, I found, paralleled that of a less able reader learning to decode alphabetic text. I was able to gain insight into the feelings of a less able reader and find specific strategies that teachers of reading might use to enhance reading instruction.

Similarities between reading words and music

While there are many differences between reading alphabetic and musical text, there are also many similarities.

This section describes the similarities relative to a symbol-sound relationship, patterns and practice, novices and experts, learning to read, and aesthetic responses.

Symbol-Sound Relationship. Both alphabetic and musical text rely on a system where the readers must acquire a correspondence between a symbol and a sound with a left to right orientation (Adams, 1992; O'Bruba, 1987). In alphabetic text the symbol is a letter used in various combinations to form words and describe thoughts. In musical text three types of symbols are used to indicate pitch, rhythm, and expression, and ultimately to describe feelings and metaphorical ideas (MacKnight, 1975).

Patterns and Practice. Reading alphabetic text relies on one's ability to recognize spelling patterns and whole words effortlessly and automatically (Adams, 1992; Anderson, et.al., 1985; Samuels, 1985). Reading musical text is enhanced by the readers' ability to perceive melodic patterns and chord tendencies (Boyle and Lucas, 1990; Colwell, 1963; MacKnight, 1975). The expert musician reads, not a series of notes, but melodic lines and rhythmic patterns (Lewis, 1989; Mueller, 1990; Wolfe, 1989). Automaticity and fluency in both are achieved through practice and repetition (Lewis, 1989; Samuels, 1985; Wolfe, 1989). Developing automaticity allows the reader of both kinds of text to give less attention to decoding individual notes and words, and more attention to deeper meaning and expression of music and literary texts. Musicians at all levels spend considerable time practicing scales, sight reading new and old music, and rehearsing new and familiar pieces. Samuels (1985) tells us, in his article on repeated reading, that this is an idea the reading instructor might borrow. Practice through repeated readings of alphabetic text produces improvement in word recognition, fluency, and comprehension, and allows the reader to perceive

deeper meanings and text structures (Adams, 1992; Herman, 1985; Samuels, 1985; Taylor, 1985).

Novice and Expert. There are many differences between novice and expert readers which apply to the reading of both kinds of text. The expert reader processes text more quickly, is more sensitive to types of text, and has a greater knowledge of patterns and text structure (Adams, 1992; Colwell, 1963; MacKnight, 1975). Proficient readers expend less effort decoding, and are able to recognize whole words and musical passages quickly with little effort (Mueller, 1990; Stanovich, 1986). Proficient readers of both kinds of text rely more on background knowledge or nonvisual information than the visual symbols in front of them (Colwell, 1963; Goodman, 1986; MacKnight, 1975; Mueller, 1990; Smith, 1985). Proficient readers use the symbol system in conjunction with the context of the passage and their knowledge of topics, musical forms, and text structures to decode and ultimately ascribe meaning. With both kinds of text the skilled readers' attention is directed primarily by the meaning of the text and not by the individual note, letter, or word.

Learning to Read. The reading of both kinds of text improves with wide reading (Adams, 1992; Beck and Juel, 1992; Crider, 1989; Mueller, 1990; Smith, 1985). One becomes a better reader by reading. Knowledge of and instruction relative to text structures also improves the decoding and comprehension of both kinds of text (MacKnight, 1975; Mueller, 1990; Taylor, 1992). Readers of both kinds of text need to master a basic set of rules (Flemming, 1988), however, these rules are best learned in the context of real reading and not as a set of isolated skills (Anderson, et.al., 1985; Beck and Juel, 1992; Boyle and Lucas, 1990; Goodman, 1986; Petzold, 1960). The teacher also needs to encourage students' early attempts to experiment with words and sounds. An emphasis on the

early mastery of skills can frustrate early readers and hinder their attempts to create meaning in music and literature (Bettelheim and Zelan, 1982; Flemming, 1988; Smith, 1985). In learning to read both kinds of text the teacher should build on the reader's strengths and find material that the student is interested in. However, the teacher must also expand students' interests and knowledge by introducing them to new literary and musical forms, topics, and genres (Flemming, 1988; Johnson, 1994).

Aesthetic Responses. Both music and literature have technical aspects, but also involve metaphors, feeling, rhythm, images, and structure (Gardner, 1985). Both music and literature involve passion which can stir the soul as well as the mind (Flemming, 1988). Indeed, when readers of alphabetic or musical text are fully engaged with a text they are usually responding on an emotional level as well as an intellectual level. Rosenblatt (1983) and Zarillo (1991) recommend that the majority of elementary literature should be followed by an aesthetic response which engages students' emotions and perception. Bettelheim and Zelan (1982) suggest that learning to read should tap into a child's emotions. If a child is truly interested in a book, decoding skills will more naturally follow. Crider (1989) and Wolfe (1989) both recommend that music teachers encourage musicianship, and find the musical expression in a piece. In short, finding the poetry of a story or a song first will generally enhance the learning of the necessary mechanical aspects.

Procedures

For this study I was looking for a situation where I could experience the processes, thoughts, and feelings of being a less able reader. Observing the many parallels between reading musical text at a high level and learning to read alphabetic text, I decided to audition for the University of Minnesota

concert choir. Although I had studied music as an undergraduate student, I had left this field shortly after graduation in 1981 to pursue graduate work in elementary education. In the fall of 1993, as a graduate student working on my Ph.D. in literacy education, I auditioned for and was accepted into the University of Minnesota concert choir. It had been 12 years since I had interacted musically with people who were capable of reading music as proficiently as the group I now found myself surrounded by. Because of my general inactivity and perhaps my lack of comparable musical ability, I found myself in the role of a less able reader of musical text. I spent two quarters with the choir practicing and performing. Like many elementary school reading classes, the choir rehearsed every day for 50 minutes. There were two performances each quarter. Neither the director nor other choir members were aware of my research project. I kept a journal throughout, describing my progress as a reader of musical text, observations relative to decoding and learning to read musical text, and the feelings of being a less able reader.

Results

So why can't Andy sing? Or more accurately why can't Andy read the musical text as proficiently as he would like? Does he need to get back to the basics? Are there worksheets he could fill out, or some form of musical phonics that he could immerse himself in? In the section that follows I answer these questions by addressing the topics of evaluation and assessment, social ambiance, the choir director, learning, and ability groups.

Evaluation and Assessment. One of my initial discoveries was that anxiety is harmful to the learning and performing process. As a teacher it is easy to forget the apprehension children may feel when asked to perform a task or skill they

feel less proficient at. The first musical assessment I encountered was the audition for the choir. Prospective choir members were ushered into the choir room to audition individually. I performed a prepared musical number, sang several scales, and then was asked to do some sight reading exercises. I had practiced and memorized the prepared piece, and this part of the audition went smoothly. However, during the sight reading exercises I performed far below my capabilities. Two choir directors, an assistant, and an accompanist sat in chairs, staring and nodding politely at me as I struggled to read isolated musical text. I found myself concentrating on random black notes, moving without confidence from one note to the next. The awareness of my own inadequate performance seemed to inhibit my reading ability further.

A second type of assessment occurred three weeks into the quarter. To test our proficiency on a specific piece of music, choir members stood up in groups of four (one tenor, bass, alto, and soprano) to sing to the rest of the choir. This is not unlike what we ask students to do in round robin reading. In this case also my anxiety greatly reduced my reading performance. My goal seemed not to bring meaning or feeling to the music, but to avoid error. I was timid, concentrating on each individual note instead of feeling the music as a whole.

A Social Ambiance. During the first couple of choir practices I sang very quietly, because I was anxious and unsure about my performance. I did not want anyone to hear my mistakes, or to discover what a poor sight reader I was. Also, not knowing any of the 40 other people in the room served to heighten my own sense of personal tension. Many choir members seemed to know each other, and most seemed to be much more in control of this musical language than I. I became very aware of those music readers around me. I listened to them closely, using their singing to direct my performance,

to model my tonal quality, and to cue notes and rhythms on various passages. I also found myself watching the director carefully, discovering her to be a very valuable resource. I used her gestures and direction to help cue and signal my reading performance. My attention then was focused on the musical text, the people around me, the choir director, and on my own performance. This left very little cognitive space in which to deal with the decoding of new text, or the expressive aspects of the music. Tension, and attention to multiple cues, thus negatively affected both my sight reading and my ability to bring meaning to the musical text.

The Choir Director. The choir director was a master teacher, very comforting, very positive, very adept at working with people, and she had high expectation for her choir. She also used every second of the 50 minute rehearsal. This lack of down time greatly enhanced our concentration and played a role in my eventual improvement as a sight reader. Most rehearsals began by giving a quick backrub to the person next to you, breaking down some of the interpersonal barriers. We also warmed up our voices before we sang. This not only helped physically with the singing process, but got singers thinking about specific techniques or note intervals. During rehearsals the director was very careful not to single anybody out when a mistake was made. Passages that might have given people trouble were done in groups, never individually. Many times in reading classes teachers do just the opposite when a child stumbles over a passage.

Learning. After a few weeks I noticed that learning was taking place. I seemed to be getting better at sight reading new pieces. I learned most effectively from whole to part. That is, when I got a feel for the totality of the musical piece, for the affective dimensions first, the technical elements seemed to make more sense. When the director started in the middle of

a musical piece, I often found myself confused until I could place the particular passage in context.

However I also learned from part-to-whole. While I did need to garner a feeling for the whole musical piece, I also profited from those times when I was able to practice small passages, either by myself apart from rehearsal, or in small groups. I needed to repeat certain passages many times before I was comfortable with them. I found I learned best, not by comprehending, but by doing. That is, with more difficult passages, I needed simply to repeat them over and over. Many novice directors and teachers make the mistake of spending great amounts of time trying to explain things to students. For many skills the learner simply needs to repeat them several times before they comprehend or are able to perform. Also, for learning, there needs to be a safe place to practice, a time where mistakes are accepted and even encouraged. If all mistakes were called to my attention early on, my anxiety and attention to each individual note would increase, and my overall performance would greatly decrease.

Ability Grouping. Reading music with this group of very proficient sight readers greatly increased my ability to sight read musical text. I read and decoded more complex music than I would normally have. This supports the notion of heterogeneous grouping. However, just as this group of more able readers helped to increase my sight reading proficiency, what of those who are already very able readers? Those at the top need also to be pushed and challenged. They too need a chance to interact and perform with others of similar aptitude and ability, to feel the joy of pushing themselves to their fullest ability. There is a need for experiences of homogeneity in order to give high level readers of both kinds of text a chance to fully develop their potential. So what can we learn that will be of use for the reading instructor? In this

final section I offer nine specific ideas that a classroom reading teacher might use with reading instruction.

Choral Reading. Reading in chorus or choral reading is a safe, effective method for improving reading fluency. Readers have multiple cue systems happening all around them in the form of other students and the teacher. Through repetition, and by stressing the expressive and affective elements readers begin to get a feel for the piece as a whole, and bring new meaning to the text, while improving word recognition and fluency.

Grouping. There are advantages for the average and low ability reader to be in groups that have high ability readers in them. This provides these readers with the opportunity to interact with good reading models and to become immersed in a variety of genre and ideas. At the same time, the high ability reader must also have occasional opportunities to read and discuss in an accelerated and enriched setting with like-minded peers.

Practice. You get better at those things you practice. In the musical context, I saw myself becoming a better sight reader as the weeks progressed. Part of this had to do with gaining more confidence relative to my own ability, and part of it was being able to concentrate and do something over and over. The reading teacher should allow for safe practice of important material, both in groups and individually every day. Being able to read an alphabetic text a second time, or returning to a poem or story allows the reader to revisit old friends and taste success. Students should also have regular practice reading small amounts of new or unfamiliar text.

Performance. Having a performance or an audience in mind as we practiced in a musical setting made the experience

more authentic. We knew we had to convey a message to real people. In reading class, performing can be in the form of Readers' Theatre, puppet shows, dramas, audio-taped radio dramas, choral reading, or poetic renditions. Real audiences make the reading task more authentic and add a new level of energy. Most children love to perform if the conditions are safe and the task is within their abilities, and performances are kept simple, easy, and non-threatening. Performing for classmates or quick visits to younger classrooms are always appreciated by both audience and performers.

Stress. Stress is a debilitating factor when learning to read. Too much stress causes the reader to attend to irrelevant features, clutters up short term memory, and encourages word-by-word reading. The reading teacher needs to create an environment that is non-threatening and as stress-free as possible. Surface level mistakes should be attended to as seldom as possible.

Interpersonal Barriers. This is very much related to stress. I found in the choir room, as soon as I began to interact with other students, my stress level decreased. I was more comfortable making mistakes and singing in front of people I knew. In a reading context, it is important to get students to interact with each other in cooperative learning situations, in group discussions, or informally. Such interaction is a valuable social, emotional, and academic tool.

Singing to Read. Music can be used with text for beginning readers to induce a multi-dimensional, bimodal learning experience. When singing to read, the tune will help reinforce word and vocabulary knowledge. In these instances the teacher writes the words to familiar songs on a large poster sheet, displayed for students to follow along.

Whole to Part and Part to Whole. Both ways of learning must be attended to. In music, pulling a passage out of context made it very hard to read. In reading, pulling words and phrases out of context increases the difficulty of the task and makes it less authentic. When reading, students should get a picture of the whole, using pre-reading experiences such as story or concept mapping, story previews, webbing, or brainstorming. When practicing or learning about a specific skill and strategy, students need a sense of context.

Fun. The most important prescription found here is to keep things fun. Things that are interesting and enjoyable are much more apt to be attended to and learned. Reading material should be relevant to the student life and developmental level. During reading class the teacher should try to eliminate down time, keeping the class moving along at a brisk rate. Interesting reading classes can also be obtained by allowing for active participation, celebrating students' ideas and interpretations, and providing opportunities for students to concentrate and practice.

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Andrew Johnson is a doctoral candidate at the University of Minnesota, in Minneapolis Minnesota.