

## **Choral Reading for Prosody in the Secondary Classroom**

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**Fluency: A Central Component of Effective Literacy Instruction**

**Prologue**

Samantha was a student in my (Robert's) graduate-level course *Comprehensive Language and Literacy Assessments and Interventions* at the University of West Georgia during the fall 2020 semester. In this course, students discover a plethora of research-based strategies and tools to engage striving readers. One of the modules in the course focuses on fluency and its central role as a component of reading success. Part of the discussion for this module centers on prosody—i.e., “expressive oral reading” (Paige et al., 2012, p. 67)—as an important subskill of fluency and choral reading as a research-based strategy for building reading fluency and self-concept as a reader (Hill, 2020). I sing the praises of Dr. Rasinski and showcase his research as part of this fluency module. Students come away recognizing that choral reading can be used to improve sight word recognition and automaticity, which together contribute to fluent, expressive reading (Paige, 2011; Paige et al., 2012). Choral reading also can be specifically advantageous for striving readers and multilingual learners (Landreth, 2018; Rasinski, 2017), and it has even been shown effective with gifted students (Ronksley-Pavia & Neumann, 2020).

While fluency has long been identified as an important component of literacy instruction in the elementary grades, it has not been widely studied or implemented with secondary students. Some research has begun to show that fluency building—and by extension lessons and strategies for prosody, including choral reading—are also effective with high school students (e.g., Kuhn & Schwanenflugel, 2019; Paige et al., 2012; Rasinski et al., 2005). High school teachers have also begun exploring prosody-building as a means to help their high schoolers engage with complex texts. For example, Hill (2020) used choral reading to help her high school students comprehend

*Romeo and Juliet*, and Hodges (2016) explored how choral reading can help secondary English teachers and their students connect with poetry. For all of these reasons, I have emphasized choral reading as a strategy for building prosody at all grade levels with all types of students, and Samantha picked up on this message. The lesson that follows shows how Samantha took what she learned from this course about fluency building to design and implement an engaging learning experience involving choral reading to build her high schoolers' prosody.

### **Prosody: A New Concept for Samantha**

I am in my 16th year of teaching, but I had only learned the word *prosody* this past fall through Dr. Robert Griffin's course in my master's degree for reading instruction at the University of West Georgia. Intuitively believing this skill was important, I had modeled "reading with expression" to my students while reading aloud, but I could not name the practice or explain its importance. After learning about how vital it is in pushing students to the highest levels of comprehension, I knew I had to begin consciously teaching the skill, not simply modeling the sound of prosodic reading. Admittedly, however, the idea of having high school students, 15- and 16-year-olds, engage in expressive choral reading of a text seemed daunting. My goal was to achieve the objectives of true choral reading and establish a class environment in which students participate willingly and enthusiastically.

We began with reading poetry. By way of establishing rapport and vying for buy-in, I told the students reading aloud may feel strange, but after doing it once or twice, the awkwardness would fade. It took a couple of rounds to warm them to the process, but the defrost was faster than I expected. The students enjoyed the choral reading of poetry, discussing the expressiveness and the reading aloud. After a week of class openers of choral reading and discussion of the poem, I had the students perform on Friday. I left the criteria of "performance"

open and vague and was pleased at what the students had to share with each other. One student developed Langston Hughes' "Harlem" (1951) into a rap, and other students recited with a violin accompaniment.

At the nine-weeks mark in October, the students responded anonymously to a class survey about what they learned and enjoyed in class so far. A surprising number said they enjoyed the poetry. One student said "reading out loud" was a favorite activity "because it's interesting to do." Another claimed the most memorable was "definitely the Egyptian poem activity, where we got to make connections." Three students requested continuing choral reading and performance of poetry in the future.

Feeling encouraged, I transferred the practice from poetry to a lengthier text, an excerpt from the *Iliad*, "Book 1: The Rage of Achilles" (Kinsella et al., 2003). Difficult enough to read fluently, comprehension is doubtful without teacher intervention; however, when I led them through a section for choral reading, students began to show signs of comprehension without a teacher first breaking down the passage. Such questions as, "How should we say this word? What is this trying to tell us as readers?" gave them enough of a boost to read the text with accurate meaning. Basic scaffolding methods necessitated this lesson be teacher-led, but I only gave them questions to develop their thinking; the discussion and decision was their own.

The next obvious step was to have the students move through the process of developing prosody on their own as they read Margaret Atwood's "My Life As a Bat" (1994). I divided the text into sections, and the students grouped together to discuss their assigned passage before they came together to choral read their section to the entire class. Typically, students do not like reading aloud, but as Julia commented, when doing so after discussion, "everyone has the same idea of what to do," and they are not intimidated.

### Fluency-Prosody Lesson Steps

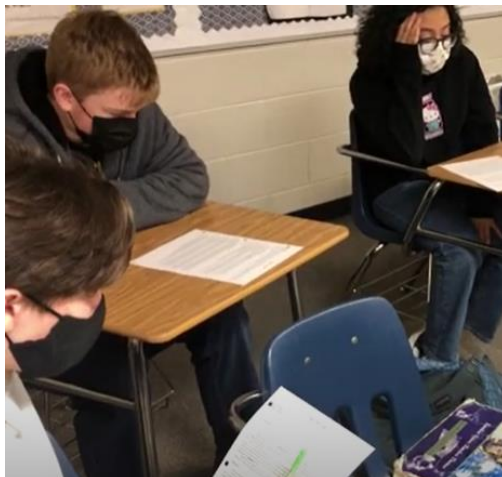
Considering social-emotional needs and skill level, the traditional choral lesson has been tweaked for developmental appropriateness of secondary students. For high schoolers, this exercise has been broken down into four steps.

#### Step 1: Silent Reading

The students read the selection silently and consider how they should orally present the different phrases and words. Although the recommendation is to first have the teacher read the passage several times, I decided to change it to better suit the personalities of my teenagers, knowing that an independent read through would increase their willingness to discuss with their peers (Rasinski, 2014).

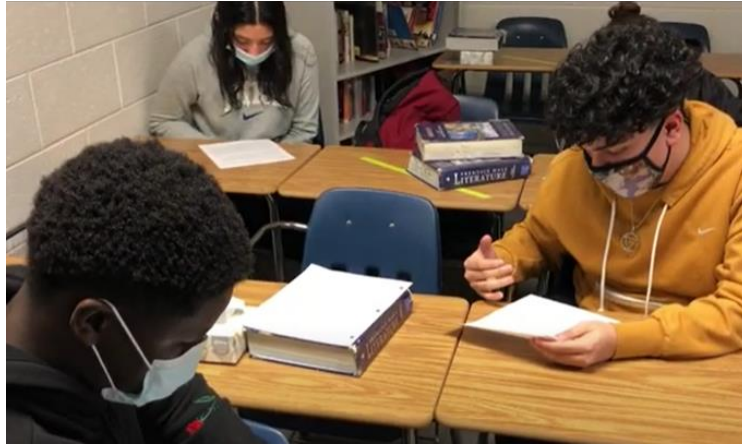
#### Step 2: Collaboration

Students gather together to discuss the ways to express the words and why they should be read in a particular way. As Dr. Rasinski pointed out in *The “Essentials” of Developing Reading Fluency* (Scholastic, 2014), the single word *dude* can take on many meanings, depending on the expressiveness of the speaker. This is the magic of the student-led discussion: they must figure out exactly how to say particular words in order to convey the author’s meaning.



### Step 3: Choral Practice

The small group practices choral reading the selection. The students do this naturally because they want to feel prepared for reading to the entire class. From the teacher's perspective, it is a double win; as they practice for confidence, they are also engaging in repeated reading, fortifying their comprehension.



### Step 4: Whole Group Reading and Performance

The whole class reads the selection together, each group reading their assignment aloud. The teacher counts down to start the first group, then each group follows respectively. There is a repeated reading from each group, so the entire passage is read aloud more than once.

#### Teacher and Student Reflections

For what may be surprising to some secondary teachers, the students enjoy the choral reading. Positive feedback has been overwhelming from all leveled readers—striving readers through gifted learners. When asked for her thoughts on choral reading, Julia reflected that these practices give her confidence in reading: “Because let’s say I didn’t get the sentence, and I was confused about how to say a certain word, explaining [how to express the word] gives me context on what the word was talking about. And I don’t like reading out loud, but with a group it’s easier because if I mess up, I’m not singled out.”

Gifted students showed high levels of engagement while reading and held high levels of discussion. When we first began choral reading, they were intrigued merely because it was different than typical class structure; additionally, this type of activity addresses several traits for engagement of gifted learners, particularly the high levels of self-regulation and collaborative discussion and decision-making (Ronksley-Pavia & Neumann, 2020). Overall, these students had positive comments about this new way of text analysis. Mickey remarked, “It’s an interesting way to see how the author wanted a reader to interpret it, and I like it better than reading by myself because then you know everyone is on the same page.” I would be most interested in research on choral reading and prosody instruction for gifted learners and how this affects their affinity for language arts classes and their overall performance in all content areas.

Because a large part of the discussion is determining the function of the words and analyzing the author’s purpose of the text, the students are conducting deep analysis and close reading before the typical timeline of instruction. Whereas in the past I would read aloud, have the students read, and then we would discuss with teacher-led questions, with this prosody lesson technique, the students are autonomously asking the same questions through the lens of attaining true fluency, which gives them the control of the direction of the conversation. Additionally, this type of reading process means that, instead of checking for and establishing understanding as a whole group, the teacher can engage immediately in dialogic questioning. Maximizing class time in the secondary schedule is of utmost concern for high school teachers, so this prosody lesson meets the needs of students and teachers on multiple levels.

Relevant to the 2020-2021 school year, this prosody lesson and discussion surprisingly worked well over Zoom, our school’s digital classroom platform. The students moved into breakout rooms to discuss how to read the selection, but they did have to further divide the

selection into individual sentences as Zoom does not allow for more than one speaker at a time. Initially, this obstacle concerned me, but the students were willing to problem solve and enjoyed the conversation just the same. As a digital learner working with Luke, Katie noticed no difference: “I feel it was pretty normal, like how it would be in the classroom, because I was able to interact with someone else.”



For classroom activities to “feel normal” is an important focus in the educational world today because of the necessity to engage students who are digitally and socially distanced from each other. This prosody lesson and discussion cultivates a sense of community and teamwork, interactions students miss from our pre-COVID class setting. Working in groups, discussing and debating, coming to a consensus—all are essentials to the five areas of social and emotional learning educators intentionally seek to bolster in their rooms (*CASEL*, 2021). Once again, this is a win-win for teachers as the lesson reinforces multiple areas of need in secondary students, from comprehension strategies to relationship building techniques.

### **Conclusion**

It seems I stumbled upon this treasure of prosody instruction, only to learn, of course, that this has been a well-established, researched method. I asked my teammates and other colleagues if they knew of this strategy, and they were also unaware. I believe professional development is the next step to encourage fellow educators to use choral reading at the secondary level. Implementation of this strategy is guaranteed to ensure student engagement and increase reading comprehension.





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