

- 3) Next the students sit or find a spot to be still. I play the melody again and their job is to **show how high and low the notes are** with their hands as they listen. In this case I may remove all sense of rhythmic duration from the notes and play them equally and slowly. It is good to challenge the students to close their eyes while listening. Repeat.
- 4) Now **students gently hum the tune** while it is played. This begins to let me know that the students know the nuances of the melody. Repeat it on a neutral syllable (doo, ma, etc).
- 5) Finally, on a screen in front of the children, I **project the lyrics** of the song with the instruction that they **read quietly** in their minds and to give a small gesture to show when they are finished. This is the first time they are seeing the text.

Ah poor bird, take your flight
Far above the sorrows of this sad night
Ah poor bird, as you fly
Can you see the dawn of tomorrow's sky?

- 6) Now I **play the tune again** and have students **read the words quietly in their minds**, pointing to the text as I play it. It's easy to know if the students are following when they arrive at the end of a line and have to reset to the start of the next. Still - they haven't yet sung the words nor have they heard them sung or spoken to them.
- 7) Game time! **The melody is performed again while students read. I stop at a random place.** Students identify the word where the music stops. Repeat 4-5 times.
- 8) When ready, **students whisper the words** while I play the melody. One time only.
- 9) Students then, finally, get to **sing the song out loud**. At this point I will switch from playing the melody along with them to accompanying them with chords on the guitar or piano. This is the final test of their musical independence. They know the song.

Ah Poor Bird

1. Ah poor bird, take your flight,
2. Ah poor bird, as you fly,

3
far a - bove the sor - rows of this sad night.
can you see the dawn of to - mor - row's sky.

That's the whole lesson. With a simple song, like "Ah Poor Bird", it takes less than fifteen minutes for students going from never having heard it to being able to sing it without my voice assisting them.

Discussion

Think about some of the elements that make up a song:

- Pitch and rhythm are combined with an underlying steady pulse or beat which doesn't waver and it can't be stopped until the song is finished.
 - a. The steady beat is a feature which separates a song from spoken language. It functions absolutely in time. It doesn't speed up or slow down.
 - b. The rhythm of the musical notes pairs to the lyrics of the song syllabically - one note per syllable.
 - c. The pitch (high and low notes) is the tune. It is one way a song encodes into the memory. In language pitch is a prosodic element.

What is happening in this way of teaching a song?

- The music is isolated from the text and taught first. The song is taught in a "whole song" approach and is never broken down phrase by phrase. There are many repetitions that students have to respond to in different ways. By the time the text is finally shown the students have demonstrated that they know the music of the song. The words are then just superimposed on top of the musical knowledge that students have already acquired and they sing it easily - as a group. This group singing is a choral reading.
- Because the text follows after the music in the presentation, the music acts as a trigger for moving forward with the reading. There isn't time to stop to decode, it has to be automatic. Thus an element of reading fluency is planted firmly in a child's mind and it would be very difficult to remove it.

- The phonological processing of syllables is established before seeing the words when students hum and sing the melody on neutral sounds.
- The song is brief and can be repeated many times in a short period of time. With each response to the song in a unique presentation, a memory is quickly made for the student. The repetitions allow us to focus on more detail in the music - and remember it. After the repetitions of just the music, the students repeatedly read the text, at first silently along with the melody, and then as a part of a game.

In writing about repeated readings on his literacy blog, Tim Shanahan states, “It is important to keep the texts brief for this work so that when students reread, memory becomes a useful scaffold.” (2020)

Please watch the following video of this lesson being taught to a 2nd grade class. It’s a different song than the one above. The video has been edited to under five minutes, the actual lesson took about 12 minutes. <https://youtu.be/eL8WN6fK1tk>

Reflections

There is a growing wealth of research that examines and shines a positive, if cautious light, on the connection between music, language, and literacy skills. Much of it looks at the shared neural processing networks between music and phonological development in young, growing brains. Getting from research to practice, however, can be a long process and a challenge.

I’ve been teaching music for over twenty years and songs in this way for almost ten years and I’m still working out the nuts and bolts. It isn’t trademarked or patented so there is no harm in taking the parts that work for you and putting your own spin on it. It is my belief, however, that the music, when taught first, gives students a solid foundation upon which to read fluently. The music acts as a primer for successful fluent reading and it happens quickly. That the music comes first is the unique feature and that’s why I like it as a music teacher.

I’m currently working with a classroom teacher and two reading specialists in my school district to gather and look at data collected from easy CBM standardized reading assessments. A proper study with controls is being developed.

I’ve presented this style of teaching to music teachers at different workshops and an EARCOS teacher’s conference in Manila in 2016. Music teachers generally love the approach but haven’t been able to give much feedback on what is happening with the

reading. I would love your thoughts and feedback - how could it be made more effective for the benefit of the child, the classroom teacher, and the music instructor?

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The practicalities:

The children have to already have developed some decoding skills but that doesn't mean we should withhold this kind of teaching. For kindergarten students I first teach them to move and respond to random music at different tempos. I teach them high and low notes. I will introduce the music of a song before the text but then read along with the younger students and have them point with me when finally presenting the text. At this point with younger children I will also echo-sing some of the lines while pointing to the text. For older students I choose songs that are more challenging and don't fit a typical rhyme scheme or songs that have irregular phrase lengths. Because I regularly try to incorporate global music into my classroom I also use this method for introducing foreign language songs. In that case, specific orthographic rules have to be taught.

Some songs have musical slurs or melismas where one syllable will have more than one musical note. What to do in such a case? I highlight or underline those words. However I try to choose songs for the younger children that avoid that when teaching following this method. For older children, 2nd grade and above though, it then becomes an opportunity for me to teach that musical concept.

One more consideration is anacrusis or a "pick-up note". This is an unstressed note or syllable at the beginning of a line and can present a challenge when deciding how to write out the text to match a melody.

I generally use an alto recorder - it projects sound well and matches the natural singing range of the unchanged child's voice. It's portable and cheap. Sometimes I use a piano, guitar, melodica, or whatever else is handy, but I prefer the alto recorder. You could hum or whistle the tune for a class but with all of the repetitions you might develop a sore throat - that's a very real thing to consider.

A classroom teacher without musical training may be reluctant to try this approach. Don't worry, teachers are born to feel foolish. If I had a nickel for all of the wrong notes that I've played for kids I'd be living on a private beach in Hawaii getting daily foot massages. Joking aside, learning the necessary musical skill is not a big endeavor. There are youtube videos galore that teach to anyone who aspires to learn. My recommendation would be to spend fifteen minutes a day going over the basics for

three or four weeks and you should have the ability to play a melody on an instrument. If the interest is there I'd be happy to lead a few zoom lessons for a group of teachers. I'm also happy to communicate with music specialists in your schools to go through the process.

A metronome is a good tool to have for keeping a steady pulse when practicing. There are many free metronome apps for all digital platforms: phones, ipads, computers...

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