Using Music to Improve Reading Fluency

By Shari Edwards on December 19, 2012
Grades: 1–2, 3–5

It's a typical morning in my classroom, and as my students finish their bell work, they begin to beg me to let them practice their reading fluency. Before long, they are pulling out their lyrics notebooks, and I am popping in a CD or opening iTunes on my laptop. This happens several times a week for us. They know that even if it isn't in my plans, I'll most likely "give in" and they will "get" to practice for a few minutes!

Ten to fifteen minutes a week with this activity means many painless and enjoyable repeated readings!

My students are becoming much more fluent readers as they read and sing along with the lyrics for a variety of songs that I've carefully chosen for this activity. Their teacher is enjoying good music, which means she is in a great mood and ready to teach!

Choosing the Music

This year, I've discovered how much my students enjoy blues, jazz, rock, folk songs, and show tunes with rich music and interesting lyrics.
Look for songs on iTunes or CDs, or ask musical friends to help you find songs with the qualities you need.

Think about what you need the song to do for your lessons. Sometimes I'm looking for specific types of words or language, and other times I'm trying to match a theme or topic. If I'm lucky, a song has both!

Consider appropriateness first and make a point to LISTEN TO and READ the lyrics closely before introducing a song to students.

Make lyrics pages for each song in large, easy-to-read print and copy them for each student.

**Introducing a Song**

Read through the lyrics together, and then listen to the music. If it is in book form, put the CD on and enjoy it together that way first. Turn the music up and let your students be carried away by it. They fall in love with the music and then really enjoy singing with it over and over again.

Talk about the story behind the song and any history you know.

Highlight words or parts of the song that support the other learning that's happening in the class.

Use several songs frequently to avoid students' memorizing the words too fast. **You want them READING instead of RECITING.**

**Deepen Learning — Pull That Song Out Again!**

Besides giving students time for **repeated reading**, working with lyrics has other benefits.

Students find rhyming words and **word structure** by pulling out this already familiar text.

**Vocabulary development** helps comprehension in other types of reading.

Song lyrics are a natural springboard to studying **themes**.

Students use **close reading strategies** to boost comprehension skills.

**Management Supplies and Suggestions**

Give each student a three-ring notebook with page protectors to keep lyrics sheets where they are easily found.

Keep a collection of place-keepers such as plastic fingers, color strips, and bookmarks to help young readers keep their place and stay engaged. When they don't need them anymore, they will stop using them and track with their eyes.

**Top Ten From Mrs. Edwards' Class (With Some Demos!):**

1. “New York State of Mind” written and sung by Billy Joel
2. “Sentimental Journey” by Les Brown and Bud Green, sung by Renee Olstead
3. “Don’t Laugh at Me” by Allen Shamblin and Steve Seskin (children’s version from the book), sung by Peter Yarrow
4. “Shenandoah” by unknown (was first a sea chantey), sung by Daniel Rodriguez
5. “Coming to America,” written and sung by Neil Diamond
6. “Garden Song” by David Mallett, sung by John Denver
7. “The Marvelous Toy” by Tom Paxton, sung by Peter, Paul, and Mary
8. “Run, Rudolph, Run!” by Johnny Marks and Marvin Brodie, sung by Chuck Berry
9. “Carol, Caroling” by Wihla Hutson, sung by Tennessee Ernie Ford
10. “Carol of the Bells” by Mykola Leontovych, sung by Celtic Women

Background Information

For my reflections and the background behind the way I use music, visit Pondering Pedagogy.

Resources to Get You Started

Timothy Rasinski on Fluency at Scholastic.com
Reading Rockets Strategies and Research
ReadingResource.net on Fluency
Kids Like Blues
Subjects: Reading Fluency
Skills: Development of Reading Comprehension

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COMMENTS (57)

September 20, 2013 at 6:25 a.m.
Anonymous
reply
Otherwise prospective clients will be put off by a bad consumer experience. opsætning af drivhus

September 11, 2013 at 4:08 p.m.
Anonymous
reply
The answer eludes me. Many declare that the nationwide regular studying stage. Supplements for healthy skin

September 8, 2013 at 2:12 p.m.
AnonymousCL
reply
I did this for my high school special education students and they loved it. I also provided them the opportunity to request songs. We did True Colours, Lean on Me, Don't Worry Be happy. This is a real success for students to improve fluency. I also had them graph their results and watch the growth!

September 15, 2013 at 8:05 p.m.
Shari Edwards
reply
I love it, AnonymousCL! These are great additions to the list of good songs for fluency practice! We started this year out with Getting to Know You from the King and I and Don't Laugh at Me. This week we will be singing and reading Coming to America by Neil Diamond! Can't wait! Thanks for sharing!

September 8, 2013 at 2:12 p.m.
AnonymousCL
reply
I did this for my high school special education students and they loved it. I also provided them the opportunity to request songs. We did True Colours, Lean on Me, Don't Worry Be happy. This is a real success for students to improve fluency. I also had them graph their results and watch the growth!

August 24, 2013 at 12:10 p.m.
Anonymous
How about "Yellow Submarine" by the Beatles. My grandchildren (ages 4 and 6) love that song and know all the words.

August 25, 2013 at 3:27 p.m.
Shari Edwards
reply
Yellow Submarine is actually on my iTunes but I didn't get to it last year. I'll have to try to work it in! Thanks for your comment!

August 24, 2013 at 10:38 a.m.
Shari Edwards
reply
I added the song, "Getting to Know You" from The King and I to my first week list. There is enough repetition that my new second graders can keep up. They loved following along with their own lyrics sheet. It is now in their notebook, along with "Don't Laugh at Me" (Peter Yarrow, from his children's book) from an anti-bullying lesson I did with them this week. Many "sneak" their lyrics out any chance they get! :)
might be able to get it to work for you. You might consider replacing unfamiliar words with pictures like a rebus. That way if they lost their way, they could get back on track with the pictures. Let me know what you find that works!
Shari.

January 10, 2013 at 9:45 p.m.
Sally
reply
Great article! Music is magical! Reading song lyrics is great fun!
Sally from Elementary Matters

January 11, 2013 at 1:06 a.m.
Shari Edwards
reply
Thank you, Sally!
I agree! It works like magic, I enjoy it as much as my students!
Thanks for the comment! You have a great website, also.
Shari

January 10, 2013 at 9:40 p.m.
Anonymous
reply
Any suggestions for middle school intensive reading trade books and songs?

January 11, 2013 at 1:04 a.m.
Shari Edwards
reply
Ashley, below, has a good list, for her 5th graders, on her site now. Some of those might work for middle school. I think I would try the early rock ideas and not try to match their current music interests. Maybe someone will come back with more ideas once they get started. I think some of the books pictured above might work for some older students, too. I'm checking out music all the time so I will try to post back here with what I find.
Thanks for the comment and let me know what you put on your list!

January 10, 2013 at 9:03 p.m.
Anonymous
reply
I am so doing this!

January 11, 2013 at 12:45 a.m.
Shari Edwards
reply
Come back and let me know how it works for you!
Thanks for the comment!
Shari

January 10, 2013 at 9:03 p.m.
Anonymous
reply
I am so doing this!

January 10, 2013 at 8:36 p.m.
Anonymous
reply
I am a K-6 music teacher and I put the lyrics up on my SMARTBoard even for Ks. I use a large purple pointing finger to track the words. I know many of my can't read all the words but every little bit helps.

January 11, 2013 at 12:44 a.m.
Shari Edwards
reply
I'm sure it helps them. They can learn so much about text and how it works even if they aren't reading the words yet. Thanks for the idea!
Shari

January 10, 2013 at 8:25 p.m.
Nancy B.
reply
Such a great idea!
I once used "I Was Made For You" by Brandi Carlisle to teach prepositional phrases to 5th graders. I should've taken it a step or two further like you did. Heading to my itunes collection to look for songs now...

January 11, 2013 at 12:42 a.m.
Shari Edwards
reply
I'd love to see what you come up with! Thanks for the comment!
Ashley reply
I really like your article! Very inspiring to me: http://www.5thandfabulous.blogspot.com/2013/01/reading-fluency-and-music.html
Thanks for sharing!

Shari Edwards reply
You're welcome, Ashley! I love your list of songs! There are several I plan on checking out for my class.
I hope it works well for your class!
Shari

Ashley reply
I really liked your article! Very inspiring to me: http://www.5thandfabulous.blogspot.com/2013/01/reading-fluency-and-music.html
Thanks for sharing!

Anonymous reply
As a music teacher I love this process! John Denver's 'Granma's Feather Day' is a great song and there's a book/cd I've used.

Shari Edwards reply
It's funny that you would mention that song. It's on my list for the spring! Thanks for the comment!
Shari

Gail reply
I am a retired teacher (after 30years) and I used to love having my kids sing songs while "reading" them off the page. The kids never saw it as reading, they saw it as singing and LOVED IT.

Shari Edwards reply
Hi Gail!
I agree! It doesn't feel like practice to my class either!
Thanks for the comment!
Shari

Carole Seubert reply
I LOVE this idea! I will be adding three sets of song lyrics to my 2nd graders' Brain Books on Monday and modeling one song. I know they'll love it. It certainly provides a highly engaging way to get the sight word practice they so desperately need and offers ways for them to gain fluency as well.
Many thanks!
CS

Shari Edwards reply
That's great, Carole!
Have fun and come back and share your experiences and good songs you find.
Shari

Rene G. reply
I am SO glad I am not alone in this. I've been trying to find robust research basis on this; it's out there, but not exactly causal (yet). My first experience with this was with nonverbal autistic children. Music seems to open that door to language AND literacy. Now as 1st grade teacher I have a "Read n Sing for Fluency" rotation as part of my Daily 5. I use all different kinds of music. Many times I end up making flip books by typing lyrics and adding pictures (jigs) and putting these in page protectors and binders. There is wealth of music available on the web for content (if not looking for pop, jazz, etc...though use that too.) Not sure if I can put the websites on a Scholastic post, but would be happy to share them with anyone who wants them. I actually have a music therapist I contact
when I come up with a crazy idea for a song and I want to include specific academic vocabulary or phonemic targets. I also include these same lyrics in student "poetry" binders....what are lyrics if not poetry set to music?!?

January 10, 2013 at 10:35 p.m.
Anonymous
reply
I also teach first grade and love the idea of a "Read n Sing for Fluency". How did you introduce this to your students and what are some of the expectations in this center? I also would like to have the websites you have used. Thank you for sharing!
Lynn

January 5, 2013 at 12:03 a.m.
Shari Edwards
reply
Hi Rene,
It's nice to see that other teachers are using this strategy. I really believe there is something to to it and if I had the time, it would be interesting to be part of a study. Thank you for contributing your thoughts and ideas here for others to benefit. Happy singing! Shari

January 4, 2013 at 10:19 p.m.
Bernice
reply
Hi Rene,
I would love to have the websites.
Thanks,
Bernicde

January 3, 2013 at 5:24 p.m.
Catherine Pawsey
reply
I totally agree with your idea. I have used Fun Phonics by Creative Teaching Press - Music and lyrics by Steven Traugh. I have the old version on cassette tape. It's for K-2 and has 4 parts: consonants, short vowels, long vowels, and blends and digraphs. It is a combination of poems and songs learned in echo format. The sheets can be copied, colored, and practiced as a single piece or made into a book. There's also reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities. Kids love music!!

January 4, 2013 at 11:39 p.m.
Shari Edwards
reply
Thank you for the suggestions, Catherine. I've used that type of program, also, with good success.
Shari

January 2, 2013 at 11:17 a.m.
Susan
reply
Love, love this idea! I teach struggling readers k-2. Any suggestions on songs would be awesome:)
Thanks for just a great idea!!

January 4, 2013 at 11:24 p.m.
Shari Edwards
reply
Hi Susan!
I have found that my struggling readers do best with a slower tempo and repetition such as a chorus that repeats throughout the song. I'll keep your request in mind as I look for songs for my class. Thanks for the comment! Shari

December 26, 2012 at 9:15 a.m.
Dori Moore
reply
Love it! My brain is swirling with ideas to use this in my grade 6 classroom. This is fun and student engagement is high. Thank you for such a great way to increase fluency... especially with struggling readers!

December 27, 2012 at 1:39 a.m.
Shari Edwards
reply
Hi Dori! I'm so happy you've found something you can take away from my blog. Please come back and share the songs you choose. There are several comments from teachers of your students' age who need appropriate song lists that will motivate middle school age students.
Thanks for the comment!
Shari
PS: In Kansas, we are getting ready for Kansas Day celebrations with an emphasis on the time of pioneers and settlement on the prairie. I have been gathering songs of that era to help my class get into that historical period and develop vocabulary. I'm enjoying my hunt!
Anonymous

reply
Try rap from the 80's and 90's. It was called conscious rap I think. Look for groups like KRS-1 and the like. How about Puff the magic dragon?

December 23, 2012 at 11:09 a.m.

Shari Edwards
reply
Thank you for the suggestions!