

“That Sounded Good!”: Using Whole-Class Choral Reading to Improve Fluency

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It was her second year teaching reading and Ms. Connolly (all names are pseudonyms) was looking for some additional strategies to engage her African American students. A reading workshop presenter discussed a strategy that was familiar to a colleague who taught second grade but that was new to Ms. Connolly: whole-class choral reading (WCCR).

The presenter cited WCCR as a flexible strategy that can be used to help students increase their oral reading fluency skills. In high-poverty urban schools, WCCR has been used with success to engage African American students lacking reading fluency. Due to its performance aspect, WCCR is a strategy that many students respond to favorably.

Many of Ms. Connolly’s students struggled with reading, and WCCR sounded like a strategy that she needed. She set out to learn more about how to implement WCCR for the upcoming school year.

Whole-Class Choral Reading

Too often, students in upper elementary grades struggle with reading (Ippolito, Steele, & Samson, 2008). Despite the billions spent on raising the reading proficiency level across the United States, approximately two thirds of fourth-grade students read at or below the basic level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Unfortunately, a significant ethnicity gap persists, with white students outperforming African Americans and Hispanics in the fourth grade by approximately 25 points.

WCCR is a classroom strategy in which all students read aloud from the same text in unison with the teacher, who models accurate pronunciation, appropriate reading rate, and prosody (expression). At the end of the reading, the teacher provides corrective feedback to the class through explanation and modeling by reviewing problematic words and phrases, noting correct attention to prosodic mark-

ers, and encouraging the class to read with “one voice.”

WCCR can be implemented through repeated readings (Samuels, 1979/1997), in which the same text is read multiple times, or through wide reading, in which various texts of similar complexity are read (Kuhn et al., 2006). Studies using WCCR as a fluency strategy suggest that readers experience improved decoding ability and more fluent reading (Paige, in press a) and that it is effective at improving oral reading fluency (Rasinski, 2003; Samuels, 2006). WCCR taps into the performance or extrinsic aspect of reading motivation and has recently been shown to be connected to oral reading fluency (Paige, in press b). Ms. Connolly sensed that WCCR could be a versatile strategy to build much-needed oral reading fluency in her African American students.

Text Selection for WCCR

The flexibility of WCCR means there are many text options for teachers at all grade levels. For example, choosing an interesting trade book is one way to make WCCR meaningful for students. Short stories also lend themselves well to WCCR, as do poems and some historical speeches and documents.

With some simple revisions, Ms. Connolly learned that content books, particularly social studies and science, can also work well to provide students with expository reading opportunities. Teachers have reported that using WCCR to read content text that is a week or two ahead of the curriculum enables students to become familiar with new vocabulary and develop background knowledge (Paige, 2008). This means that when instruction begins on a new unit, teachers can go deeper into the content because students are familiar with vocabulary and content basics.

WCCR texts should be long enough to provide about a two-minute reading at an appropriate

reading rate; texts are normally between 200 and 250 words (see Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2006). Whatever text is chosen, teachers should read it closely for appropriateness and sensibility. Texts can be prepared on handouts and distributed to students as they enter class, or a suitable text can be taken directly from a class text, such as a literature textbook. Another idea to avoid copying and using instructional time for text distribution is to display the text on the class overhead; however, be certain that all students can see it well.

Daily Implementation

Getting Started

Ms. Connolly learned the steps for implementation of WCCR (see Figure 1) and has put them into practice. She begins on Monday by introducing the text and discussing its origin and content with her students to assist them with comprehension. She reviews potentially difficult words, offering correct pronunciation and meaning. On the student copy of the text, Ms. Connolly applies bold for quick reference to words

that are anticipated to be difficult (see Figure 2 for an example).

After the word review, Ms. Connolly models a fluent reading of the text while students follow along silently with their copy. After the reading, she tells the students that they will read the passage aloud and in unison, with one voice. To begin all students reading at the same time, Ms. Connolly instructs them to start reading after she counts down “3, 2, 1.” A “false start” is encountered in which some students don’t quite understand or aren’t paying close attention, and the whole-class reading must be restarted. After a false start or two, Ms. Connolly has the class off to a steady start.

During the whole-class reading, Ms. Connolly reads the passage with expression in a voice that is loud enough for all students to hear. Also while reading, Ms. Connolly moves about the classroom and uses proximity to encourage all students to read. She listens closely to hear how the class is reading—that is, are they having difficulty with specific words or phrases? Occasionally during this first reading or two, Ms. Connolly must stop the class in the middle of the reading and restart them because they have

Figure 1
Procedures for Classroom Implementation of Whole-Class Choral Reading Using Repeated Reading of Text

Before Reading

1. Distribute or display reading text to students that represents an average reading level for the class.
2. Ensure that all students are attending to the passage; provide background knowledge about the passage to aid in comprehension.
3. On Monday, model aloud a fluent reading of the entire passage while students read along silently.
4. Review passage by reading aloud target words and phrases that may not be familiar to students.
5. Remind students to observe prosodic elements of oral reading such as commas, periods, and question marks.

During Reading

6. Count down “3, 2, 1” to help students begin reading on cue.
7. Read passage aloud along with students; everyone reads with one voice.
8. Listen for reading miscues and difficulties with text while modeling fluent reading and walking about the classroom.

After Reading

9. Review, through modeling aloud, pronunciation of words and phrases that were difficult for students.
10. Provide positive encouragement to the class, highlighting what was done well and what might be improved.

On Monday and Tuesday, you may have the whole class reread part or all of the passage as necessary to reinforce appropriate oral reading.

Figure 2
Sample Passage With Bolded Vocabulary Words for Quick Reference

Our New Car

Dad said our car has served us well over the years, but it is now old and **decrepit**, breaks down too often, and has over one hundred and fifty thousand miles on the engine. After hearing my parents debate whether or not it was time for a new car, they have now decided that it is time to find a new vehicle.

I've been keeping up with cars this year and in science class my teacher told us about the way car engines have changed so that they use less gasoline. Some car companies have started making battery-powered cars. In some ways these cars are like the toy cars that I use to have that ran on batteries. The difference is, these new cars have been specially **engineered** to go up to 100 miles without recharging. These new cars can also **accelerate** very quickly and are extremely quiet. I even read an article in the paper recently where some **pedestrians** didn't hear a battery-powered car coming and walked in front of it. Car manufacturers are working on this problem to keep everyone safe.

Other new cars run on a battery when they're going slowly, and then use a regular engine when they have to go faster. These cars can also go much further than 100 miles, just like a regular gasoline powered car. My Dad says that for people who drive in areas where they have to stop and start a lot, these **hybrid** cars can save on the cost of gasoline. I'm not sure what kind of car my parents will get, but I think it'll be quite different than our old one.

gotten out of synch with each other. To assist the class, she reminds them to follow her voice and to listen to each other, because the goal is for them to read with one voice, similar to a choir.

For the second WCCR on Monday, Ms. Connolly digitally records the class reading and shares it with students, who are keenly interested in how the class sounds. Ms. Connolly works with the class to identify ways their reading can improve.

Corrective Feedback

During WCCR, Ms. Connolly is conscious of a specific instruction by the workshop presenter to never single out any specific student for either appropriate, or inappropriate, reading. Rather, feedback should be directed toward the class as a whole. A strength of WCCR is the anonymity it provides—even reluctant readers will read during WCCR because they perceive an environment that provides psychological “cover” from both teacher and peer criticism. This safe environment must be preserved to maintain student interest.

Tuesday Through Friday

Based on the needs of her class, Ms. Connolly reviews difficult words and phrases for correct pronunciation and phrasing. She gives a reminder to pause at commas, stop at periods, and follow her modeling of expressive reading. By Wednesday, little class

correction is required. The students know that they are getting better, too, particularly when Kayla exclaims for the class at the end of the reading, “That sounded good!”

To maintain student interest on Thursday, Ms. Connolly implements echo reading, a variation of WCCR in which the teacher reads a sentence, then the class reads the same sentence, until the text is finished. On Friday, Ms. Connolly splits the class in half and uses antiphonal reading in which the halves volley back and forth with the reading. Finally on Friday, Ms. Connolly makes a second digital recording, and the students are amazed at how much better they have become between Monday and Friday.

Keep It Spicy!

It's important that a variety of fluency strategies are used in the classroom to avoid the development of boredom on the part of both students and the teacher. Of course, WCCR can be overused to the point that it becomes routine for students and loses its luster. To keep your fluency instruction fresh, use WCCR in conjunction with other strategies such as paired or buddy reading (Topping, 1987). Try rotating WCCR with scaffolded silent reading (Reutzel, Jones, Fawson, & Smith, 2008) or with other fluency building techniques such as Readers Theatre or radio reading (Rasinski, 2003). A novel application of WCCR is to have students choral read classroom instructions or

very short readings that a single student might otherwise be called on to read aloud.

WCCR can help many students from a variety of settings engage in the monitored reading situations that assist them in becoming successful readers. WCCR can be a versatile strategy for both narrative and content reading and provides important time with text that so many students require.

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- "Implementing Readers Theatre as an Approach to Classroom Fluency Instruction" by Chase Young and Timothy Rasinski, *The Reading Teacher*, September 2009
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