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KARAOKE: A TOOL FOR PROMOTING READING

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Abstract

This article is a description of a teaching strategy that we have experimented with promising results as a motivational tool. The strategy uses Karaoke as a tool to build and enhance reading behaviors such as fluency and motivation as a twofold purpose for struggling readers. An audio and video sample of children engaged in reading and singing using Karaoke is enclosed. Some modified Karaoke instructional approaches are mentioned for a whole group / classroom use.

Introduction

Five-year old Kindergartner, Eesha comes home from the bus-stop and talks excitedly about Britney Spears as her favorite singer and starts to sing, "Oops, I did it again!" She had heard about the singer in the school bus where apparently, most kids were into "Britney Spears". When she started Kindergarten, in less than a month, her repertoire of singers and songs had increased dramatically adding to her knowledgebase of the mainstream American culture. Well, not wanting to miss any opportunity to expand her interest further, we searched for ways to nurture this seed of music in her. A quick search on the internet, brought to attention an outstanding Karaoke website that has been wonderful in developing not only music skills but more important, reading skills and fluency further among not only kindergartners but also older students. This is a parenting site at BBC website that has nursery rhymes for preschoolers <http://www.bbc.co.uk/music/parents/activities/karaoke/index.shtml> . **Karaoke*** refers to action of singing to a musical background while reading the related lyrics.


*(Karaoke originated in Japan. The word comes from 'kara', empty and 'oke', orchestra. In this form of singing, the music tracks for specific songs are provided by the media, be it CD, computer or tapes, the vocals or the voice is provided by the individual playing karaoke. Most Karaoke systems require the singer to use a microphone, however, with online karaoke, one can sing along without the microphone. The history of Karaoke resources are available at the following websites: http://nj.essortment.com/historyofkar_rezh.htm)

There is a growing body of evidence that arts instruction can significantly strengthen students' academic performance (Gardiner, M. et.al.1996 ; Robitaille, J. & O'Neil, S. 1981). Studies such as these show that the inclusion of music and the arts in reading program results in a dramatic rise in reading test scores. Hansen and Bernstorf

(2002) discuss the positive impact of music on reading achievement. Butzlaff (2000) conducted meta-analysis studies investigating reading achievement and music, and found a relationship between the two. Lamb and Gregory (1993) found a high correlation between children's ability to read and ability to discriminate pitches accurately. One must be cautious of establishing causal relationship between the two, as more research is needed.

Music enhances students' creativity by activating visual images and thoughts. Many teachers recognize that "the melodic and rhythmical features of language are a valuable means of creative thinking" (Piazza, 1999, p. 63; see also Gardner, 1983; Jackendoff, 1995; Lerdah, 1996). Gipe (2002, p. 370) discusses linking literacy lessons with music and how music can be infused into every teaching session. According to Gipe (2002, p. 371), "Music also provides opportunities for students who experience difficulty with reading and writing to think and learn through another language that is repetitive, melodious, and emotional." The use of music in the classroom can make the entire learning process more enjoyable and can stimulate "right" brain learning.


The revised standards for reading professionals by IRA (2003, Standard 4) include student's interests, using technology based non-print materials and motivating learners to create a literate environment.

The joint delivery of music and text provides an exciting, immersive experience for the child. Text comes alive with the addition of background music and synchronized voice. Children can either sing along with their favorite singers as words flash by on screen, or turn off the Karaoke vocals and assume the identity of their hero for a short while. In my experience with struggling readers demonstrating little confidence and poor decoding skills, it is less threatening to them if an adult voice reads / sings along. In particular if the reader is not sure of the lyrics / words. However, some struggling readers ask to be the solo singer and have the lead singer sound turned off. The availability of this option to turn on or off the lead voice makes this tool reader-friendly. Linked here is a video file () containing a sample of two students, Eesha, age 6 and Maya, 8 years old using Karaoke.

First time when we attempted integrating the use of karaoke in our reading clinic with Kenneth, a third grader, and a reluctant, disenchanted reader with a very negative attitude towards reading, the results were promising. This was the first session when we found him engaged in a literacy activity where he showed great interest. He never indicated any interest in music, but when asked if he wanted to pick one of the four singers, he selected a favorite song. He had the knowledge of the entire song lyrics and read along beautifully, synchronizing with the highlighted text on the screen and pausing at appropriate places. He didn't want to leave the session unlike where he had always asked the tutor what time it was (waiting for the session to get over). Children may or may not indicate interest in music if asked specifically. However, given an opportunity, they can display impressive reading behaviors using unique tools to pique their interest. Engaged reading is strongly associated with reading achievement (Campbell, Voelkl, & Donahue, (1997). Their study found that the more highly engaged readers showed higher achievement than those who were less engaged in reading. Increasing motivation leads to

more reading (Guthrie, Wigfield et al., 1999). More reading leads to better readers, as in the Matthew effect, in which the high achievers improve more rapidly than low achievers over time in school (Stanovich 1986). Motivation is the link between frequent reading and reading achievement.

Similar websites or resources can be easily integrated into the reading curriculum at any grade level, both to motivate the students and to further enhance their reading skills. Labbo (2004) reports that when children read a computer screen they encounter dynamic digital constructs and genres. Online Karaoke resources typically require a streaming audio player such as RealPlayer (by Real Networks), which (in its basic version) is available as a free download over the internet (<http://www.real.com/>). Alternatively, just the streaming audio files for Karaoke music can also be located. Some schools may not allow access to live streaming files, as they are filtered out if they relate to 'entertainment' links. Readers must be warned about copyright infringement.

Linked here is a video file () containing a sample of two students, Eesha, age 6 and Maya, 8 years old using Karaoke. A note of caution when using websites, teachers / adults must make sure that the site contains songs / lyrics that are appropriate for children.

Modified Karaoke Instructional Techniques

Choral Karaoke: Most schools have data-projectors that can be hooked up to the computers with internet access in the classroom, with monitor screen projected on the wall / screen. The words can be displayed on the screen as students sing along. It is like Choral Reading with words displayed on the screen. In the clinic, a first grader who was reading at pre-primer level, had difficulty keeping up with the pace of the displayed text. She didn't know the entire rhymes and just hummed wherever she skipped the text. For her, a lead singer was helpful since she echoed the lines after the singer, much like a Neurological Impress Method (where the adult reads along first and the child trails behind reading aloud the same text). For a reader like the first grader, it is recommended reviewing the words first on paper before attempting karaoke reading.

Silent Karaoke : Music can be turned off if a small group of children engages in using computer-based Karaoke within the back of the classroom or students could use headphones. The students can read along the flashing text. Note, some children find the silence threatening in a one-on-one situation, particularly when they are not familiar with words. They are less likely to take risk to sing along without a lead singer when the lyrics are unfamiliar. Previewing of karaoke text is recommended.

Repeated Reading Karaoke: Distributed scripted hard copies of the songs to the readers. Have students review and practice reading the lyrics prior to using Karaoke. Sometimes phrases in the monitor display move at a faster pace with no control on pacing. Thus, having a hard copy and prior reading the text helps students familiarize themselves with the songs. Once they become familiar with the lyrics or text, have them sing along using Karaoke. Eesha and her friend copied one of B. Spears' entire song down and practiced

singing it aloud from the hard copy. Once they became comfortable with the song, they used the online streaming karaoke to sing along as the lines flashed by. Also, if the lines are flashed at a faster pace where it cannot be regulated (i.e, for songs with faster tempo), then the hard copy comes in handy. Reading begets reading. With more practice, students develop fluency. Fluency benefits of students' own repeated readings of a text have been well documented (Dowhower, 1994). Children who have reading difficulties, repeated reading practice significantly improves oral reading rate, accuracy, and comprehension (Rasinski, 1990, Young et al. 1996).

Karaoke as a Motivational Tool

In a brief quasi-experimental using Karaoke at a 8-day Summer Camp with a group of 25 students in grades 2 and 3 (rising 2nd and 3rd graders), it was discovered that reading rate was not affected but motivation towards reading went up. The purpose of the research was to find if reading rate is affected by the intervention of Karaoke. The group was randomly divided into two groups, one received Karaoke instruction (Karaoke Group) and the other didn't (Non-Karaoke Group). The students were from an inner-city, urban elementary school. The school was a Title I school with more than 95% African-American children. All of the low achieving students were mailed out letters to participate in the Summer Camp. Parent permission letters were received for 25 children originally, however, by the time the camp started some of the selected children had dropped from the program due to Summer Break, and by the end of the camp, 11 children remained in the study (7 in intervention group and the other 4 in the comparison group). Children (from 2nd and 3rd grades) were mixed into two groups. All the children in the program were administered 2ⁿ and 3rd grade level passages from a reading inventory, and their oral reading rates were recorded. Reading rates of all the children in the program were taken prior to start of the Summer Camp and at the end of the Camp.

Karaoke Intervention: Starting from the first day of the camp, the Karaoke Group (KG) came into the computer lab for 15 minutes and played nursery rhymes from the karaoke website <http://www.bbc.co.uk/music/parents/activities/karaoke/index.shtml>. Each child had headphones on, so they could increase the volume and sing along as words are highlighted. Each child was given a hard copy of all the rhymes that were indexed at the website. The order of the rhymes in the hard copy was same as that on the website. The purpose of distributing the hardcopies was to ensure that in case the print moves too fast (the website doesn't have a feature to regulate the tempo or pace of the computer read-aloud) they were able to use the hard copy as a back up. We also made an alternative plan in case the server or the website goes down. The backup plan was to use the TV with a Karaoke plug in of a different song. Prior to starting the Karaoke intervention, the teacher reviewed the rhymes with all the participating children and went over the directions. Children were not familiar with the nursery rhymes that were included at the web link. The 8-days went by quickly. Children were post-tested with the same Reading Passages from a reading inventory and the reading rate was recorded.

Data Analysis and results: Rasinski (2004) discusses three important dimensions of reading fluency, as word decoding (sounding out), automatic processing (meaning

making) and prosodic reading (appropriate phrasing, parsing). Karaoke, as an instructional tool addressed the decoding and prosodic reading aspect of fluency. No significant gains were found between the two groups in their reading rates during pre and post tests using reading inventory passages. Some of the factors contributing to this could be that the sample size was very small (7 in experimental group and 4 in control group), the period of intervention was too short (15 minutes for 8 days), attendance rate was poor (only 2 of the 7 children were there on all 8 days), and the students were not familiar with the genre of nursery rhymes. The genre of rhymes being different from that of the narrative passage texts the students were tested on, could be a limiting factor, particularly if the acquired reading skill is not being transferred to another situation. The typed up rhymes were short and simple and children had memorized them well. The teacher noted that they knew the rhymes so well after a few sessions that they were not paying attention to words on screen. On the other hand, teacher observed that the motivation factor was very high. The Karaoke group looked forward to coming to the Karaoke session and once they started the session they wanted to continue. Teacher also noted that initially students demonstrated shyness towards singing out loud but once they had headphones, they were okay.

Additional research is warranted in order to learn about the specific effects of using Karaoke as a teaching tool on reading achievement of students. Many questions related to Karaoke are raised, such as, are the effects on literacy the same for a familiar piece as they are for an entirely new song? Or, how do teachers determine if reading is actually occurring, or if the participant is just mouthing memorized words to the song? Are students able to transfer the reading skills from the context of Karaoke to the context of non-digital print formats in academic and non-academic environments? Do readers carry over reading skills from one genre of text to another?

Summary

Children do not perceive Karaoke as a reading activity rather for many it is a fun music play. Struggling readers who dislike reading and have a negative attitude towards reading find this atypical non-reading like method more motivating. The tool could be particularly useful in enhancing fluency in reading. As readers immerse themselves in music and interact with text, a new dimension of their reading behavior starts to emerge. During karaoke process, children are engaged in different aspects of reading that promote fluency.

Additionally, the reading skills acquired using a Karaoke build confidence among users who are then able to transfer the skills to academic reading. Children who dislike reading aloud in front of class members and others, find use of Karaoke less threatening as they sing aloud in a small group or with the lead singer or with music in the background as opposed to total silence. The key is to tap their potential using available atypical academic tools. As one struggling reader said simply after a Karaoke session, “reading is fun”!

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Some Karaoke Websites

There are several children's karaoke sites that provide simple songs like nursery rhymes or interactive music games suitable for all ages listed below.

http://www.disney.go.com/disneyrecords/karaoke-player/disney_karaoke.html

This is a Disney site that has short Karaoke version of the popular Disney songs. It provides two versions of a song, for instance, Zip-a-dee-doo-dah (vocal and instrumental). A click on the vocal version shows lyrics being highlighted as they are sung, whereas with the instrumental version, only the lyrics show with music but no voice. The words are a little small but the words are high-lighted as they are read, although at a faster pace.

<http://pbskids.org/music.html> - PBS songs on-line, the songs are scripted and a voice follows along, although the corresponding highlighting of phrases is missing.

http://www.krazykats-karaoke.co.uk/karaoke_kids.html : This site lists a number of Karaoke sites, some of which have subscription charges.

<http://www.mightybook.com/karaoke.htm>

This subscribed site lists- Flash Animated read aloud books and Karaoke sing-alongs, the songs are unfamiliar but the voice clearly sings along and the words change color as it goes so you can follow it.

Eesha (6 Years old) and Maya (8 years old) using Karaoke



Nursery Rhyme displayed on monitor with high-lighted phrase in the last line “five humps”

Children in the Summer Camp using Karaoke in the computer lab



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