Improving the Sight Reading Skills of High School Choral Students Through Aural Training,

Relative Solmization, and Performance Assessment

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Phase 1, Part 1: Problem Identification

The problem addressed by this Action Research Project was that high school choir students lacked the skills, confidence, and experience to accurately sight read appropriate choral literature without the help of a piano. To s*ight read,* in reference to the music classroom, is to sing or play a piece at sight, before it has been otherwise rehearsed or performed, according to the *New Harvard Dictionary of Music* (1986). This skill is both important in developing the musicianship of young music students and is required by the national standards for music education published by the Music Educators National Conference (1994) and the state standards for music education published by the Illinois State Board of Education (1997).

This problem was important for several reasons. As part of an annual competition at the state level, the choir students were expected to sight read *a cappella* in four parts. A cappella singing is defined as performing without accompaniment (*New Harvard,* 1986). This requirement forced the students to demonstrate their sight reading skills as a group without the aid of an accompanying instrument, such as a piano. The competing choir received both a numerical score and judge's comments regarding the sight reading skills of the group.

In addition to the annual assessment by a third party in state-level competition, improved sight reading skills had other applications. For example, most of the choir's rehearsal time was spent in learning parts by rote: one section listening to and learning parts as played on the piano, followed by the other three voice parts. Very little rehearsal time was available for singing good literature and exploring higher-level musical and emotional interpretation, since most of the rehearsal was spent "pounding parts."

Confidence is also an important factor in a cappella sight reading. The students in question sight read with a high level confidence when the director or accompanist played their parts on the piano, but had a low level of confidence when sight reading a cappella. This low confidence level translated into less effort, sound, and accuracy when the choir attempted to sight read without the help of the piano.

Pre-implementation Needs Assessment

The existence of the discrepancy between desired sight reading skills and actual performance was assessed through various means. These assessment tools included historical data from the choir's performances at the annual state-level competition, as well as created assessments to determine the group's current sight reading skills, student perceptions, and other choir teachers' views on this area of choral music education.

Historical data was collected from the judges' scores and comments from four previous annual competitions at which the choir's sight reading was evaluated in a one-time performance assessment. These scores were reported on the Music Adjudication Sheet (Appendix A, p.47). This form was designed by the Illinois High School Association (IHSA) to provide students and teachers with third-party feedback from a respected choral professional regarding the sight reading performance of the group at contest. The form contains numerical ratings and written comments in eight categories: Tone, Intonation, Balance, Rhythm, Dynamics, Musicianship, Response to Director, and Other Performance Factors. *Tone* refers to the overall choral sound of the ensemble, and is described with such adjectives as rich, full, thin, breathy, supported, clear, free, or open. *Intonation* describes the accuracy of the choir in singing the correct pitches and

singing in tune as an ensemble. *Balance* is the term used to describe the interaction of voices within the choir: the individual voices should blend into a seamless choral sound, and each voice part (soprano, alto, tenor, and bass) should sing in balance with the other parts. *Rhythm* refers to the ensemble's accuracy in performing the piece using the correct duration for each given note or rest. *Dynamics* are the volume contrasts within the piece. The choir's *musicianship* is evaluated in terms of the style, interpretation, and emotional involvement in the piece. The choir members are also evaluated in their *response to the director* in order to assess the effectiveness of verbal and nonverbal cues between conductor and musicians. Finally, there are several *other performance factors* that contribute to the quality of a given performance, including the posture, general conduct, and appearance of the ensemble.

Each of these categories is scored from one to five, numerically representing a (1) poor, (2) fair, (3) good, (4) excellent, or (5) superior performance in the given category. The points are totaled and a final rating is computed using the Rating Computation Table on the form to express the overall sight reading performance on the same numerical scale. The final rating, however, is expressed using Roman numerals in order to distinguish it from the categorical scores, with a Division I rating being equated with the superior performance level. While this scoring system is a somewhat complex process, the Music Adjudication Sheet was a valuable resource for quantifying the somewhat subjective musical skills needed to accurately sight read a given piece. It should be noted that the divisional labels (Division I = Superior, Division II = Excellent, etc.) for the final Roman numeral ratings do not reflect the actual perception of these ratings among music teachers, adjudicators, and students. Generally speaking, the Division I (Superior) rating is viewed as the goal and is given for an excellent performance; the Division II (Excellent) rating is indicative of a fair performance; and the Division III (Good) rating is reserved for poor

performances. Division IV and V ratings are rarely, if ever, given in a contest situation. This skewed perception is the result of many years of system-wide "rating inflation."

Historically speaking, the scores received from previous choral sight reading performances evidenced a consistently median performance level over the years on the part of the choir in question, with much room for improvement. The choir had shown improvement each year, but had never scored high enough on the Music Adjudication Sheet to obtain a Division I Superior rating on their sight reading performance.

The Music Adjudication Sheet also provided the categorical framework for the Teacher-Made Sight Reading Rubric (Appendix B, p. 48). This rubric was created in order to assess the sight reading ability of the current high school choir. The categories from the Music Adjudication Sheet provided the basic structure, so that the choir's skills were evaluated within the same scope and context as the annual contest adjudication. The rubrics' scoring system, however, was a significant departure from the Music Adjudication Sheet. Like the Music Adjudication Sheet, the Teacher-Made Sight Reading Rubric used a score from one to five in each category. The scoring levels on the rubric, however, used descriptors to indicate what each scoring level meant. For example, in the category of tone quality, a score of five indicates that the choir sang with a full, supported tone, free from tension and pleasing to the ear, while a score of one describes a tone quality that lacked support and fullness or demonstrated considerable vocal tension. The corresponding scores on the Music Adjudication Sheet simply indicate a superior or poor performance in the category of tone quality. The purpose of the added descriptors was to minimize the subjectivity of analysis of tone quality and other categories, and to make the resulting score more meaningful to the teacher and students. The rubric, used in conjunction with the Music Adjudication Sheet scoring analysis, also helped determine the

specific categories in which the choir needed the most improvement in order to increase sight reading skills. The rubric was used to assess the choir's initial ability to sight read a four-part piece a cappella. This assessment was accomplished by the director introducing the rubric to the students, giving clear instructions for sight reading the piece, and scoring the rubric immediately following the sight reading performance by the group.

Since student confidence is an important part of good sight reading, it was important to determine the students' perception of their own skills as sight readers. To this end, the students completed the Teacher-Made Perception Survey (Appendix C, p. 50). The survey was created to determine how the students as a group felt about their sight reading skills, their perception of what good sight reading requires, and their willingness to work on improving their sight reading skills. The survey contained twelve statements regarding these areas, to which the students responded on a scale of one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). The resulting scores were tabulated and compiled to show that there was significant room for improving the students' confidence as sight readers and their perception of sight reading skills.

Another important resource for determining the discrepancy between what is and what should be in reference to the choir's sight reading skills were other choral teachers. The Teacher-Made Colleague Survey (Appendix D, p. 52) was created in order to gather evidence of what is occurring in choral classrooms around the country regarding the teaching of sight reading skills. The survey consisted of three selected-response questions, three multiple-response questions, and five open-ended questions, each designed to clarify the respondent's teaching situation, views about and rationale for or against teaching sight reading, and the specific methods used, if any. The survey was designed and created using Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) with the intention of creating an instrument to be published on the Internet, accessible from anywhere.

The existence of the survey and the need for respondents was announced through email, postings

on three online music education bulletin boards, and email announcements sent to two music

education listservs. The listserv announcements proved to be the most efficient manner of

contacting large numbers of choral teachers with minimal effort, and also seemed to create a

surge in the number and frequency of responses to the survey.

In order to quantify the results of the Teacher-Made Colleague Survey, the response data

was compiled and percentages computed for the frequency of responses to particular survey

items. These frequency percentages were also compiled based on categories of respondents, i.e.,

the percentage of high school teachers who teach sight reading using a published method

combines responses to three of the eleven items. While there appeared to be a broad range of

philosophy and practice regarding the teaching of sight reading in the choral classroom, a

majority of collegial respondents considered sight reading skills to be a priority in their teaching

and expected their programs to produce musically literate students. This was further evidence of

a discrepancy between the sight reading skills and confidence of this writer's choir and the

expected level of performance and achievement.

Needs Assessment Report

Historical data from previous years' contest performances was reported using the Music

Adjudication Sheet (Appendix A, p. 47). These scores reflect a trend of improving sight reading

scores over time. While this positive progress was welcome, the choir had yet to receive a

Division I (Superior) rating for their sight reading performance. Figure 1 presents the scores

received each year in the eight categories, the median and mean scores in each category, the total

scores for each year, and the median and mean totals. The scores indicated with an asterisk (*)

are the mean and median of the total scores from each year, rather than the sum of the median

and mean scores from each year.

Figure 1: Contest Scores – Sight Reading

Category	1999	2000	2001	2002	Median	Mean
Tone	3	4	3	4	3.5	3.5
Intonation	3	2	3	3	3	2.75
Balance	3	2	4	4	3.5	3.25
Rhythm	3	4	5	4	4	4
Dynamics	3	2	3	4	3	3
Musicianship	3	2	3	4	3	3
Response to Director	4	5	5	5	5	4.75
Other Performance Factors	3	5	5	5	5	4.5
Total Score	25	26	31	33	28.5*	28.75*

As illustrated by these scores, the choir in question historically scores very well in the

categories of Response to Director and Other Performance Factors. The students have also

scored well in the category of Rhythm, while the mean score in this category is slightly lower.

The areas with the most room for improvement are Intonation, Dynamics, Musicianship, and

Balance. This combination of categorical strengths and weaknesses indicates that, at least in

competition, the students concentrate on listening carefully to the director's instructions and

performing with poise, but do not consistently sing with confidence, accuracy, and interpretation.

Continuing the positive trend by improving each of the four weakest categories by one point over

the scores from 2002's competition would increase the total score to 37, which is within the

range of scores translating to a Division I (Superior) rating.

Using the same categorical structure, the current sight reading ability of the students in

the choir was evaluated using the Teacher-Made Sight Reading Rubric (Appendix B, p. 48). The

students were given a piece in four-part harmony to sight read without the help of the piano

playing the voice parts they were to be singing. The director and students discussed the nature, structure, and potential pitfalls or difficult passages in the piece. Following this discussion, the students were given starting pitches and asked to begin sight reading the piece. The choir struggled through the piece with some difficulty. After they had completed this exercise, the director used the Sight Reading Rubric to assess the sight reading performance skills of the group. The choir received a score of "2" in the Tone category, indicating an unsupported and non-unified tone. The students scored a "3" in Intonation since they performed with several discrepancies in pitch, although the ensemble did remain in the correct key throughout the piece. The group's strongest score was that of "4" in Balance, since there were only minor inconsistencies in the group's overall balance. Because the group performed the piece with some difficulty, they scored a "3" in Rhythm, and received a score of "2" in both Dynamics and Musicianship. The difficulties the group experienced in these categories were caused by the struggles and frustrations of finding the right pitches, distracting the group from an interpretive and musical performance. The group also scored a "3" in both Response to Director and Other Performance Factors, since they had several moments of inattention and performed with incorrect posture. Their conduct during the exercise also had a negative effect, both on the scores in these categories and on the overall performance. From this exercise, it can be seen that all of the categories have much room for improvement, starting with the weight given to the importance of sight reading. If the students can remove the distractions of inattention and apathy by improving their concentration and effort as a group, the scores in the other, more technical categories will also improve. Once the students begin to gain confidence in reading pitches and rhythms, the group can begin working on sight reading with expression and interpretation, improving the scores in these areas as well. This baseline assessment of the current sight reading

skills of the choir was both a frustrating and informative exercise for the students and the

director.

Prior to their performance assessment of sight reading skills, the fifty-six students in the

choir completed the Teacher-Made Perception Survey (Appendix C, p. 50) in order to show how

they feel about their sight reading skills as individuals, as well as those of the group. Other items

on the survey were designed to show the students' understanding of what specific skills are

necessary in order to sight read well. Finally, the students were asked about their willingness to

work on improving individual and group sight reading skills. The results of this survey are

outlined in Figure 2. For a complete list of student responses, please see Teacher-Made

Perception Survey Results (Appendix E, p. 54)

Figure 2: Teacher-Made Perception Survey Results – Summary

Survey Item	**Median Score**	**Mean Score**	**Range of Responses**
1. I am able to sight read a new piece well without the piano.	3	2.9	1 to 4
2. Our choir is able to sight read well without the piano.	3	2.9	1 to 4
3. I am able to sight read a new piece well, as long as the piano plays my part.	4	4.0	2 to 5
4. Our choir is able to sight read a new piece well, as long as the piano plays all parts.	4	4.1	2 to 5
5. I would like to be a better sight reader.	4.5	4.4	3 to 5
6. I would like our choir to be better at sight reading.	5	4.4	3 to 5
7. Our rehearsals would be more productive if we had better sight reading skills.	4	3.6	1 to 5
8. Knowing note names is an important skill for sight reading.	4	3.6	2 to 5
9. Knowing solfege syllables (do, re, mi, etc.) is an important skill for sight reading.	3.5	3.5	1 to 5
10. Understanding music notation is an important skill for sight reading.	4	4.1	3 to 5
11. I am willing to spend time every day working on sight reading skills as a group.	4	3.5	1 to 5
12. If I work on becoming a better individual sight reader, the choir will benefit as a group.	4	3.9	2 to 5

In comparing the scores of the first two items with those of items three and four, it can be seen that the choir students, on average, had a strong positive perception of their ability to sight read well as individuals and as a group, as long as they had help from the piano. In contrast, they had a much less positive perception of their individual and group sight reading skills when they were expected to perform a cappella, without the help of the director or accompanist playing their parts on the piano. This discrepancy indicates a lack of confidence on the part of the choir as a group.

The average scores of "4.4" for items five and six indicate a strong desire on the part of the group to improve sight reading skills on both the individual and group levels. Items seven and twelve refer to the rationale and means for improving the sight reading skills of the group. The respective mean scores of "3.6" and "3.9" show a positive inclination of the group toward making such improvements. Along the same lines, the average score of "3.5" on item eleven indicates that most individuals in the group were willing to make a daily effort to improving the sight reading skills of the group.

Items eight, nine, and ten all refer to specific skills important to quality sight reading. Of these three, the mean score of "4.1" on item ten indicates that the students viewed an understanding of music notation as one of the most important skills for improving sight reading. Overall, the survey results indicate a perceived weakness in a cappella sight reading, a willingness to improve the necessary skills, and an understanding of the means and rationale for doing so.

The final evidence supporting the sight reading problem was collected using the Teacher-Made Colleague Survey (Appendix D, p. 52). One hundred choral music teachers responded to this survey, indicating whether they teach sight reading or not, the amount of time they spend

teaching sight reading, their rationale for teaching sight reading, and whether they use a

published method to increase the sight reading skills of their choral students. Of these one

hundred respondents, ninety (90%) indicated that they teach sight reading in choral classes (item

two). This fact shows that most of the teachers who responded to the survey place a high value

on sight reading skills and include them in the choral curriculum and in their daily lessons. Of

the ten teachers who indicated that they do not teach sight reading, seven (70%) cited time

constraints as the primary reason for not including sight reading in daily lessons and rehearsals.

Only one respondent indicated a lack of training in methods for teaching sight reading as the

reason for not teaching these skills. Since the choir in question is at the high school level, the

survey responses of those teachers who also teach high school choir were evaluated separately.

Of the fifty respondents who teach high school choir, forty-seven (94%) teach sight reading in

choral classes. Only three (6%) such teachers do not teach sight reading as part of the choral

music curriculum. This indicates an even stronger positive emphasis on the teaching of sight

reading at the high school level.

The survey results for those respondents who teach sight reading in their classes are

outlined in Figure 3. The table indicates the number and percentage of responses for each item.

These results are also shown for the teachers at all levels who indicated that they teach sight

reading, as well as for those at the only the high school level who teach sight reading in choral

classes.

Figure 3: Teacher-Made Colleague Survey Results

Item/Responses	**Respondents teaching sight reading at all levels**		**Respondents teaching sight reading at only the high school level**	
	Number of responses	**Percent**	**Number of responses**	**Percent**
4. Do you use a published sight reading method?				

Yes	49	54.4%	27	57.4%
No	41	45.6%	20	42.6%
7. How much time per class/rehearsal do you spend teaching sight reading?				
Less than five minutes	28	31.1%	7	14.9%
Five to ten minutes	50	55.6%	33	70.2%
More than ten minutes	12	13.3%	7	14.9%
8. What are your reasons for teaching sight reading?				
Preparation for contest	30	33.3%	24	51.1%
State standards	31	34.4%	16	34.0%
Improved musicianship	86	95.6%	44	93.6%
More efficient rehearsals	70	77.8%	42	89.4%

A small majority of respondents used a published method to teach sight reading concepts. These choir teachers listed twenty different published methods currently being used in their classrooms. Of these, five methods were mentioned by four or more respondents. This suggests that, although there are many sight reading methods currently available, a few set themselves apart in quality and usefulness. Those respondents who do not use a published method stated that they created their own sight reading exercises, used excerpts from the music the choir is currently studying, or utilized another source for sight reading material, such as church hymnals. The decision to use a published method, and which method to choose, seemed to be based on personal preference among the teachers who responded to the survey.

Most of the respondents who teach sight reading in class spend five to ten minutes on this activity per rehearsal or class period. The percentage of teachers in this category is even higher for those at the high school level. A smaller group of respondents spends less than five minutes per rehearsal on sight reading exercise. Less than 15% of each group of respondents spend more than ten minutes of each class working on sight reading skills. This indicates that, while sight

reading is a priority for these teachers, most devote a relatively small amount of time to this effort. Several respondents commented that, although the time spent teaching sight reading is relatively slight, the rehearsal time spent studying and rehearsing music is more effective when the students have the sight reading skills they need to be competent, literate musicians. This fact is further evidence of the discrepancy between the sight reading skills of the choir in question and the desired level of proficiency.

Item eight in the Teacher-Made Colleague Survey requested information about the respondents' rationale for teaching sight reading in the choral classroom. Nearly all respondents cited the improved musicianship of their choral students as a reason for teaching these skills, indicating an intrinsic, philosophical desire for their students to become better and more literate musicians. Most respondents also indicated that improved efficiency of rehearsals was a motivating factor in the decision to teach sight reading. While this response reflects a more practical tendency than improved musicianship, it is also an intrinsically oriented motivation for the practice of actively teaching sight reading in the choral classroom. About one third of the respondents indicated that extrinsic factors, such as preparation for contest and meeting state standards, influenced their decision to teach sight reading. Among respondents teaching sight reading at the high school level, a slight majority cited preparation for contest as a motivating factor. Taken as a whole, the responses to the Teacher-Made Colleague Survey indicate that choral music teachers who value the musical development, competency, and literacy of their students also choose to actively help their students develop better sight reading skills. This further supports the need for improved teaching methods and sight reading skills for the choir teacher and students in question.

Implementation Goals and Objectives

Goal

The goal of this action research project was as follows: The high school choir will gain the skills, confidence, and experience to accurately sight read appropriate choral literature without the help of a piano.

Objectives

The following measurable outcomes were designed to evidence completion of this goal:

1. After a period of six weeks, the high school choir will increase their overall sight reading skills by 25% as measured by the Teacher-Made Sight Reading Rubric (Appendix B, p. 48).

2. After a period of six weeks, the high school choir will improve their performance assessment score in the category of sight reading by at least two points over last year's score, as measured by the Music Adjudication Sheet (Appendix A, p. 47).

3. After a six-week implementation period, the high school choir members will increase their positive perception of sight reading skills by at least one point on average, as measured by the Teacher-Made Perception Survey (Appendix C, p. 50).

Phase 1, Part 2: Background and Setting

The setting for this Action Research Project was suburban district in the upper Midwest region of the United States. The district was designated as a community unit school, meaning that several communities were served by a single unit district. This district served children from five communities, with a single campus located centrally in a rural area. The high school student body was comprised of four hundred students in grades 9 – 12. Most of the students were Caucasian, and the majority were of middle-class socio-economic status. The writer was in the sixth year as the vocal music teacher for grades 6 – 12 in the district, teaching choirs in the elementary, middle, and high schools. As the only vocal music specialist on the faculty, the writer was independently involved in the analysis, intervention, and evaluation stages of the project. The high school principal and superintendent of the district were informed as to the nature and progress of the project, but were not directly involved.

The high school choral program was comprised of a single Concert Choir, which met every day as a curricular class for one hour. The enrollment in choir was open, meaning that any interested student from any grade could join choir with the teacher's approval. No previous singing or choral experience was required. An extracurricular Jazz Choir was also part of the program. In order to participate in the Jazz Choir, students were expected to complete an audition procedure.

Because of the open nature of the membership in the Concert Choir, the participating student had a wide range of musical experience and training. Some students were involved in many other musical endeavors and had depth of experience, while others were involved in music for the first time and had no valuable musical experience or training. This discrepancy of

previous experience and musical training helped contribute to the lack of confidence and skill in the sight reading abilities of the choir as a group. Since the choir performs as an large ensemble and their sight reading skills are evaluated based on the groups' performance, the focus of this action research problem is on developing the skills and improving the performance of the group as a whole, rather than focusing on individual students. While improved individual performance would obviously be helpful to the larger group, the scope of the intervention and evaluation was oriented to the large ensemble's development in the area of sight reading.

Previous attempts to address this problem included a "sink-or-swim" approach and a "follow-the-leader" solution, neither of which had either positive or lasting results. The sink-or-swim model involved presenting the group with a new piece every day to sight read in four parts. The students were expected to pick up the necessary skills simply through repeated exposure to new sight reading material. This approach was neither sequential nor motivating, and it produced only slight improvements in the confidence and sight reading ability of the choir. The follow-the-leader approach was intended to employ the skills of those students with more experience and training in sight reading, while everyone else did their best to keep up. The students with the most experience and skill were seated among those with less experience, and the group was given piece after piece to sight read. Again, any improvements in the sight reading skills of the group were nominal and did not carry over to the following year's choir.

Phase 1, Part 3: Fact Finding

Importance of Teaching Sight Reading

The choir students participating in this action research project did not have the skills, experience, and confidence to accurately sight read appropriate choral literature. In examining the discrepancy between the desired sight reading abilities of the choir students and their current level of achievement, a review of the current research was both edifying and encouraging. As stated earlier, both the National Standards for Music Education and the Illinois state standards outline the value of sight reading as a desired aptitude among students of music. While music educators implement the national standards on a voluntary basis, the state of Illinois has mandated that the school districts of the state align their curriculum with the state standards and use the corresponding benchmarks to evaluate student progress. According to these standards, music students at the high school level should be able to "demonstrate the ability to read written notation for a vocal or instrumental part" (Illinois State Board of Education, 1997). Similarly, the national standards state that proficient music students participating in a choral ensemble or class should be able to "sightread [sic], accurately and expressively, music with a level of difficulty of 3, on a scale of 1 to 6" (MENC, 1994). It should be noted that this measure of difficulty is challenging to employ with regard to choral repertoire, since choral music is not graded as specifically as school band music. Both on the national and state level, however, choral teachers are reminded of the importance of sight reading as a musical skill.

While these standards for high school students' sight reading abilities are clear and specific, incorporating the teaching of sight reading into the choral rehearsal in order to meet the standards presents many challenges. In *Building Choral Excellence,* Steven Demorest outlines two important factors choral teachers must overcome in developing a program or curriculum for teaching sight reading in the choral classroom. First of all, choral groups are evaluated by the public and by administrators in performance. This tends to place an emphasis on preparing music

for performance rather than teaching musicianship skills. In turn, this emphasis on preparing

literature rather than teaching and rehearsing skills leads to the false assumption that teaching

sight reading takes time away from rehearsal and preparation. In truth, taking time to teach sight

reading enhances the rehearsal experience and leads to more meaningful and musical

performances. The second obstacle Demorest outlines is that many choral teachers, including the

author of this project, were not taught specific sight reading skills in their own choral training.

He states that teachers who have not formal sight reading training "are unlikely to have either the

skills or the awareness to teach it to others" (2001, p. 1). While the importance of teaching sight

reading skills is clear, these two obstacles can prove daunting enough to stop the process before

it begins.

In order to address the challenges of meeting the state and national standards for sight

reading, several resources have been developed. In the *Music Resource Manual for Curriculum

Planning,* the authors discuss the importance of integrating these standards into music

instruction. Rather than developing courses to teach specific skills, all of the musical and

intellectual skills outlined in the standards should be incorporated within the course of study in a

music program (Bowers, Davis, Edwards, Fodor, Keenan-Takagi, LaCroix, & Polancich 2002).

Susan Byo's research indicates that those educators trained as music specialists are best equipped

for this task of integration. Music specialists have the highest level of motivation and positive

perception of their abilities to teach the skills outlined in the national standards (1999). Todd

Fallis echoes these findings, stating that rehearsals can be structured to teach new concepts by

incorporating those skills that are already familiar and comfortable. By breaking music down and

studying the elements present (melody, harmony, etc.), teachers and students can explore a new

piece structurally and reconstruct it as a musical performance (1999). While the process of

developing lessons that help students meet national and state standards can be overwhelming, integration of musical concepts into the rehearsal is an important and effective tool for the process.

Musical Skills for Sight Reading

An important concept for implementing sight reading skills in rehearsal is the value of aural skills among choral students. Aural skills include the ability to hear and identify intervals, rhythms, and melodies, as well as the ability to reproduce these musical elements vocally. Demorest argues for the importance of aural skills in a curriculum incorporating sight reading. While students may be able to accurately describe how music notation works, they "cannot sing something they have never heard regardless of the number of rules they have learned" (2001, p. 58). Leslie Guelker-Cone agrees, and suggests that the most effective method for developing these aural skills is to conduct choral rehearsals without the use of a piano or other accompanying instrument. This technique forces the students to develop aural skills quickly, and helps students develop a better understanding of the melodic and harmonic relationships of the pitches sung by the group (1998). Sight reading without the piano is the most significant challenge of leading an unaccompanied rehearsal, but is also rewarding. According to Deborah Sheldon, developing aural skills through sight reading training enhances a musician's ability to detect errors in performance (1998). This is an important skill for conductors and music teachers, but it is also valuable for the chorister. The ability to detect an error in the student's own part or in another part is the first part of correcting that error before it becomes rehearsed and permanent.

In addition to aural skills, choral musicians should continue to develop their ability to perform music expressively, even when they perform a piece for the first time. This ability to sing at sight with expression helps determine the achievement level of a sight reading choir. Paul Broomhead suggests that choral students that have developed a sense of musical proficiency and autonomy can perform with expression both individually and within an ensemble (2001). Brian Gorelick argues that this autonomy is developed, at least in part, through an understanding of sight reading concepts and the development of sight reading skills. A choir with high achievement in sight reading can rehearse more efficiently, spending less time learning parts and more time exploring the creative and expressive elements of each piece (2001). A choir that can sight read with expression has greater opportunity to explore and enjoy music, and will give a more meaningful and emotional performance.

Aural and expressive skills form the foundation for sight reading. The level of confidence within the ensemble, however, is perhaps one of its most valuable assets for successful sight reading. Demorest argues that the importance of confidence in sight reading cannot be underestimated:

> Over the years, I have noticed that there are two kinds of singers: those who consider themselves "readers" and those who do not. What is interesting about that perception is that the difference in ability level between those two groups is not always that great. The statement is more reflective of a singer's attitude toward reading. The sense of accomplishment that students experience as they progress through a sight-singing curriculum can give them the confidence they need to begin to think of themselves as readers. (2001, p. 123)

Cindy Bell agrees that instilling confidence in the ensemble is one of the conductor's primary

responsibilities. A choir that sight reads with confidence will always read with more success than

an ensemble that reads or performs tentatively (2002). Lynn Corbin explores the idea of

confidence further, stating that "the self-confidence that students have when they feel

independent as musicians is well worth the effort" (2001). This increased confidence or

perception of confidence can be the result of regularly rehearsed sight reading skills, and can be

enhanced by successfully sight reading challenging new music.

Sight Reading Systems and Methods

Sight reading has been defined earlier in this work as the ability to sing or play a piece

before it has been rehearsed. This definition is an oversimplification, however, of the processes

involved in the act of sight reading music, especially in reference singing rather than playing an

instrument. The musician must visually comprehend the music notation, translate this notation

into melodic and rhythmic patterns, and accurately reproduce the pitches indicated. This final

step is the most challenging for young singers, due to the relative nature of pitch itself.

Instrumentalists trust that a certain combination of valves, keys, or positions will reproduce a

given pitch, while vocalists must rely on their aural skills to accurately reproduce the indicated

intervals. In order to achieve this accurate reproduction, singers use various systems for sight

reading.

Every sight reading system has the goal of reproducing tonal relationships accurately.

They include singing on solfège syllables (do, re, mi, etc.), using numbers to represent scale

tones (1, 2, 3, etc.), using letter names to represent pitches (C, D, E, etc.), and learning a melody

based on the interval distance between each pair of consecutive notes. While the list goes on, the

systems fall into two categories: relative solmization and fixed solmization. Demorest describes

these categories as follows:

> In the relative system, syllables are used to denote scale steps and the first step is always
>
> the tonic of the scale. In the fixed system, syllables are used to denote pitch names, and
>
> they represent the same pitches regardless of key. (2001, p. 38)

While this definition might be confusing to those not familiar with musical terms, relative

solmization simply means that the syllables representing scale function are moveable and can be

used on any pitch. "Do," "re," and "mi" are always the first three syllables in an ascending scale,

regardless of the starting pitch. A scale in the key of C major starts on "do," and a scale in the

key of D major starts on "do" as well. In fixed solmization, syllables are not moveable, but are

assigned to specific pitches. A scale in the key of C major starts on "do," while a scale in the key

of D major starts on "re." Patrick Antinone found that using a relative solmization system

incorporating moveable-"do" solfège had more favorable results for beginning choral students

than a system using fixed solmization (2000). Mark Sumner examined this idea in more depth,

and found that relative solmization, within the context of the Kodaly method developed in the

1940's and 1950's, is an effective tool for teaching sight reading in the secondary choral

classroom. While the Kodaly method is largely accepted as a system for elementary general

music, Sumner contends that continuing the relative solmization concepts into secondary music

education helps students understand and develop a better sense of pitch relationships within a

given key (1997).

Other research also supports the use of a relative solmization system in teaching sight

reading to choral students. Alan McClung found that a 77% of All-State choral students in six

states used some type of relative solmization system for sight reading. Most of these students

used moveable-"do" solfège, and a smaller group favored using numbers to represent scale steps.

Only 4% of the students involved in the study used a fixed solmization system for sight reading

(2001). Guelker-Cone suggests that moveable-"do" is the best system for sight reading in an

unaccompanied choral rehearsal, citing the same advantages of pitch relationship and tonal

center as other researchers. Furthermore, moveable-"do" has other advantages, including the use

of pure and open vowels rather than the closed vowels, multi-syllabic names (i.e. "seven") and

diphthongs encountered when using numbers to represent scale steps (1998). The body of

research supports using some system of relative solmization with students beginning to gain

sight reading skills in order to reinforce intervallic and melodic relationships among the pitches

in the scale.

After choosing an appropriate system for teaching pitch relationships, the next challenge

in teaching sight reading is incorporating the sight reading work into the rehearsal. The research

shows that this integration of concepts and performance preparation is the most effective method

for teaching sight reading in the choral classroom. In other words, setting aside one day each

week to work on sight reading is not as effective as integrating sight reading concepts into every

part of the rehearsal. Alice Hammel suggests that, whether choral teachers use published

materials or write their own sight reading exercises, daily progressive exercises are an effective

way to reinforce sight reading skills (2002). Corbin concurs, stating that when music students

"become proficient in a variety of musical skills, less time will be spent in pounding out notes

and re-pounding out notes, and more music learning will occur on all fronts" (2001). These

positive benefits of integrating musical concepts such as sight reading into the rehearsal do not

come without effort, however. Gorelick emphasizes the importance of careful rehearsal planning

to achieve positive results when incorporating sight reading concepts within the rehearsal, to the

point of scheduling musical activities within the rehearsal down to the minute in order to create

and maintain flow between the introduction of musical concepts and their application in

performance during the course of a single rehearsal (2001).

One obstacle in the integration of sight reading into the choral rehearsal is that materials

used for sight reading are generally much simpler, musically speaking, than the literature

currently studied by a given choir. As evidence of this discrepancy, Demorest points out the fact

that "to provide literature that keeps students challenged as performers, teachers often choose

music that is beyond the choir's ability to sight-read successfully" (2001). In order to more

effectively incorporate sight reading into the rehearsal, Demorest suggests that the choir rehearse

music they can sight read as diligently and in-depth as the pieces they are preparing for

performance. Sometimes, the simplest pieces offer more opportunities for exploring musical

phrasing and expression than those pieces that are more technically challenging.

The Role of Teacher Enthusiasm

Selecting a system and method for incorporating sight reading study in the choral

rehearsal are important first steps. If the choral teacher places a high value on sight reading as a

musical skill and teaches the subject with enthusiasm, system and method become secondary.

The current research indicates that an enthusiastic approach to teaching sight reading has a more

positive effect on increasing student achievement than does a particular method or system. Bell

suggests that music teachers must anticipate the days when student enthusiasm is replaced by

frustration and fatigue. This situation is certainly a possibility when introducing the challenging

and complex concepts involved in sight reading. Choral teachers should develop ways of

meeting a frustrating situation with enthusiasm (2002). Dwayne Dunn's research on verbal and

facial reinforcement in the choral rehearsal suggests that positive teacher feedback during

rehearsal has a profound effect on the group's performance and attitude toward rehearsal (1997).

Demorest reinforces the connection between teacher attitude and sight reading skills. He

suggests that sight reading success "does not seem to lie with a particular method or approach …

instead with teachers who believe in the importance of sight reading and teach it every day"

(2001, p.19). Exploring this idea further, Demorest states:

> Attitude can contribute in a number of ways. First, demonstrating genuine enthusiasm for
>
> an activity will always yield better results with students than taking a workmanlike
>
> approach. Enthusiastic teachers are likely to be more creative in presenting sight-singing
>
> challenges to their students. Second, teachers who believe in the importance of sight-
>
> singing are more likely to devote rehearsal time to its development and tie it to various
>
> aspects of the rehearsal. (2001, p. 32)

Choral teachers incorporating sight reading into rehearsal should do so with forethought, passion,

and enthusiasm. This allows the students to perceive the importance of sight reading as a musical

skill and helps motivate them to gain the necessary skills to be effective and independent sight

readers.

Assessment

Sight reading skills can be reinforced, encouraged, and taught in the choral classroom.

Without effective assessment strategies, however, it is impossible to determine how much choral

students have progressed or what effect their progress has on performance. Sight reading

success, like many musical endeavors, is often subjective and interpretive. Assessment strategies should also include clear and applicable feedback for the students. Demorest suggests that group assessment strategies, in which the sight reading performance of an entire ensemble is evaluated, are effective means of measuring progress. His research has found that using a rubric for evaluation and feedback of ensemble sight reading performance is the most effective means of group assessment (2001). Demorest's research on individualized testing also suggests that improvement in sight reading at the ensemble level is not necessarily an indication of individual student improvement. He suggests that individualized testing is an effective way to aid in the transfer of sight reading skills from group performance to individual progress. While individual testing is a valuable tool, group assessment is also effective, especially when accompanied by immediate and applicable feedback (1998). Effective group assessment is an integral part of teaching sight reading in the choral classroom.

Extra-musical Connections

Research shows that sight reading skills have an obvious and direct benefit in the choral classroom. A related issue currently being debated by the research community is the relationship of these sight reading skills to other areas, particularly reading. Dee Hansen and Elaine Bernstorf contend that sight reading music incorporates aural awareness, phonemes, symbol recognition and decoding, cuing systems, and fluency. Since these are many of the skills necessary for beginning readers to be successful, it follows that students who can sight read music should be better readers in general (2002). Norman Weinberger contends, however, that sight reading music has been shown to incorporate different patterns of eye movement and brain activity than

reading text. This indicates that, at least from an anatomical and biological function perspective,

sight reading music is a unique activity and cannot be directly compared with improved text

reading skills (1998). In either case, the discipline and rehearsal skills learned from developing

sight reading prowess can be applied in other curricular areas, such as math an reading.

Conversely, teaching models from other curricular areas can serve as guides for

improving music instruction, especially for sight reading and the interpretation of choral texts.

Delta Cavner and Elizabeth Gould have illustrated that the concepts of whole language can be

applied in the music classroom. The basic tenet of whole language is that authentic and complete

experiences help students learn and apply appropriate skills. This technique, when applied in the

choral classroom, helps students approach a new piece as simply that: a new piece of music.

Rather than isolating a collection of pitch and rhythmic symbols to decode, the students can

begin making music and enjoying the creative expression of the choral experience the first time

they pick up a piece of music (2003). Incorporating sight reading in the choral classroom helps

students make direct and indirect connections with other curricular areas. These connections help

them become better musicians and better students in general.

Phase 1, Part 4: Selected Solutions

Evidenced by careful review of the current research regarding teaching sight reading in

the choral classroom, several themes set themselves apart as key structural elements of a quality

sight reading program within the scope of choral rehearsals. First, aural skills are important for

successful sight reading. Additionally, a sight reading system using relative solmization for

decoding and interpreting intervallic relationships is the most effective for beginning singers.

Finally, relevant feedback from an effective group performance assessment instrument aids in the development of appropriate skills and confidence among the choir members. These three key elements were chosen to be enthusiastically integrated within the rehearsal structure for the choir students in question, in order to increase the students' experience, confidence, and achievement in the area of sight reading.

The research of Demorest (2001), Guelker-Cone (1998), and Sheldon (1998) was the basis for a focused solution involving the improvement of the students' aural skills. Each of these researchers have shown that the ability to mentally hear a melody, vocally reproduce a written line, and analyze intervallic relationships between pitches are key factors in developing sight reading skills. Because of the importance of improved aural skills, one third of the planned interventions for this project were designed to address this area.

A large portion of research centered around appropriate systems and methods for teaching sight reading. Antinone (2000), Sumner (1997), McClung (2001), Guelker-Cone (1998) and Demorest (2001) all compared relative- and fixed-solmization systems in their research. Each researcher found significant evidence that relative solmization is a more effective sight reading system for beginning choral students, especially if this is the type of system with which they are already familiar. In order to increase the choir students' experience and confidence with sight reading, a relative solmization sight reading system was chosen to be implemented as one third of the planned strategies.

The final group of selected interventions was based on Demorest's research (1998 & 2001) regarding assessment of sight reading within a choral ensemble. Determining the level of success in a subjective area such as musical sight reading demands careful and appropriate performance assessment. The importance of quality feedback in improving the sight reading

skills of an ensemble should not be underestimated and cannot be overemphasized. A weekly

performance assessment was chosen as the final set of interventions in order to provide this

feedback to the singers in the ensemble.

In addition to the specifically selected solutions, other researchers influenced the means

of implementation. Hammel (2002), Corbin (2001), and Demorest (2001) all place an emphasis

on integrating sight reading training within the scope of the rehearsal. Each of the selected

solutions were designed to be integrated fully within the choir's established rehearsal routine.

Bell (2002), Dunn (1997), and Demorest (2001) champion the role of teacher enthusiasm in

order for the implementation of sight reading strategies to be effective. When the students

perceive that the teacher values sight reading as a musical skill, they are more successful in

incorporating this skill into their personal musicianship. While the issues of integration and

enthusiasm did not result in specific selected strategies, they were taken into account and had an

effect on the daily implementation of the strategies.

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Phase 2, Part 1: Implementation Plan

The following action plan, comprised of daily and weekly activities over a six-week

implementation period, was developed in order to help students gain the necessary skills,

confidence, and experience to accurately sight read choral literature. Each week, the students

participated in an activity designed to help them improve and utilize their aural skills. These

activities were complimented by daily sight reading exercises using relative solmization, created

to increase the students' experience and confidence in sight reading. Finally, the students'

progress was assessed on a weekly basis in order to determine the rate of positive progress and

provide the students with quality feedback regarding their developing sight reading skills. The

weekly structure of the implementation plan was designed to focus on particular categories of the

Teacher-Made Sight Reading Rubric (Appendix B, p. 48) and the Music Adjudication Sheet

(Appendix A, p. 47); to see this weekly structure in outline form, please see the Implementation

Plan Outline (Appendix F, p. 58). The implementation plan was structured as follows:

Week 1, Activity 1: Rhythm pattern echoes and canons. In order to increase the students'

aural awareness of rhythmic patterns, the choir teacher clapped and tapped several rhythmic

patterns and asked the choir members to echo what they had heard in each pattern. The level of

difficulty of this activity was increased by creating a rhythm canon: the students were expected

to listen for and process the pattern to be repeated as they were repeating the previous pattern. In

other words, the teacher was one pattern ahead of the group, and the students were expected to be processing two rhythmic patterns simultaneously. The teacher created the rhythmic patterns for this activity spontaneously during the lesson itself.

Week 1, Activity 2: Daily rhythmic sight reading exercises. During the first week of implementation, the choir spent five to ten minutes each day sight reading rhythmic exercises from *The Jenson Sight Singing Course* (David Bauguess, 1984). These exercises were implemented in order to help the choir members gain experience recognizing rhythmic patterns at sight.

Week 1, Activity 3: Rhythmic assessment. The choir completed an assessment activity at the end of the first week of the implementation period in which they sight read a Teacher-Made Assessment Piece (Appendix G, p. 59), a short four-part piece similar to one they might encounter in a performance or contest situation. This performance assessment focused on the rhythmic skills the students had been developing during the week, and feedback was generated using the Sight Reading Rubric (Appendix B, p. 48). This feedback was then compared with the baseline figures obtained in the Needs Assessment portion of the project.

Week 2, Activity 1: Melodic pattern echoes and canons. This activity, intended to develop the aural skills of the group, was similar to the rhythmic canons from Week 1. The students began by echoing melodic patterns sung by the teacher, using solfege syllables. To add a measure of challenge to the activity, the repetition was done while the teacher sang the next segment to be repeated. Again, this forced the students to listen and perform at the same time. This week's aural activity had the added element of the interesting harmonic relationships created when the choir's performance of repeated patterns and the teacher's exposition of the

next pattern coincided. The melodic patterns used for this activity were spontaneously created by the teacher during the implementation.

Week 2, Activity 2: Daily melodic sight reading exercises. The musical element strengthened by this activity was the students' sense of melody. They were presented with unison exercises from the *Jenson* method (Bauguess, 1984) in which the melody moved by step. The students sight read these exercises by taking time to determine the sequence of syllables as notated in each exercise, rehearsing each exercise mentally, and singing them as a group.

Week 2, Activity 3: Melodic Assessment. The assessment activity for this week focused on the melodic relationships of pitches within each voice part. The students were presented with a second Teacher-Made Assessment Piece (Appendix G, p. 59) and given a few moments to review the piece before singing it. The group's performance was assessed using the Teacher-Made Sight Reading Rubric (Appendix B, p. 48).

Week 3, Activity 1: Question-and-answer phrases. During this activity, students shared ideas in a group discussion about characteristics of musical phrases. They then broke up into partner groups. Each group was to create a "question phrase," a musical idea that sounds unfinished, and an "answer phrase" to follow it and create a complete musical sentence or idea. These were created without the piano or other instruments, using only the students' voices and solfege syllables. Volunteer partner groups then shared their phrase pairs with the rest of the group by performing them a cappella.

Week 3, Activity 2: Daily harmonic sight reading exercises. The sight reading exercises selected from the *Jenson* method (Bauguess, 1984) for this week included larger intervals in the melodic structure and some harmonic elements (more than one pitch sung at the same time). This

significantly increased the difficulty of the exercises, as the students were expected to build on their previous experience and add the skill of singing in harmony at sight.

Week 3, Activity 3: Harmonic assessment. The four-part assessment created for this week focused on the developing harmonic skills of the ensemble. They were expected to sing larger intervals within each part and maintain the sense of key and intonation without the help of the piano. The third Teacher-Made Assessment Piece (Appendix G, p. 59) and the Sight Reading Rubric (Appendix B, p. 48) were used for this assessment activity.

Week 4, Activity 1: Aural identification using solfege. This activity was created to expand the aural identification skills of the choir. The teacher played a series of short melodic patterns on the piano and sang a second series of melodic patterns. The students were expected to identify in writing the solfege syllables that were sung or played. The students then used their individual aural analyses to sing the patterns back to the teacher at the completion of the activity, using the correct syllables. The activity was designed to reinforce the functional relationships of the pitches within the scale.

Week 4, Activity 2: Daily dynamics sight reading activities. The sight reading exercises for this week were again taken from the *Jenson* method (Bauguess, 1984). Since these exercises are not published with dynamic notation, the teacher amended the exercises to include several aspects of dynamic interpretation, including basic dynamic levels, crescendo, and decrescendo. The students were responsible for sight reading the exercises as a group, singing the correct pitches on the correct syllables and interpreting the dynamic notation at the same time. This added a further level of difficulty and independent skill to the daily sight reading exercises.

Week 4, Activity 3: Dynamic notation assessment. The four-part Teacher-Made Assessment Piece (Appendix G, p. 59) for this week incorporates notation of dynamic changes

within the piece. The students were evaluated on their ability to reproduce the correct pitches and

rhythms, with the added skill of correct interpretation of the dynamics notated on the piece.

Feedback for the students was generated using the Sight Reading Rubric (Appendix B, p. 48).

Week 5, Activity 1: Text-as-phrasing. Choral music is unique in that it incorporates text

as a means of musical expression, generally speaking. In order to sing a phrase with expression,

the students must be able to hear the flow and accent of the phrase. This can be accomplished by

reading aloud the text of the piece naturally, taking note of the accent and flow of the words as

they are read. This activity was completed using the text of the pieces the choir was preparing for

their next performance. A student volunteer read the text of each piece, while the rest of the

group listened for the natural accent and flow. Then, they applied this understanding to the

musical interpretation of the piece by singing as a group and incorporating the natural phrasing

of the text as they interpreted the piece musically.

Week 5, Activity 2: Daily interpretive sight reading exercises. The daily sight reading

exercises for this week built on the skills the students had already developed, including

accurately reproducing pitch and rhythm and interpreting dynamic markings. This week's

exercises, also from the *Jenson* method (Bauguess, 1984), were sight read with the added skill of

musical interpretation. The students were instructed to sight read with phrasing in several

different styles (rhythmic, flowing, etc.). This added element of musical interpretation was

included to help the students approach sight reading with a musical understanding, rather than

mechanically reproducing the pitches and rhythms of a new piece.

Week 5, Activity 3: Interpretive Assessment. The four-part assessment exercise for this

week included several musically interpretive elements, including instructions for phrasing,

tempo, and style. In order to determine the choir's ability to accurately interpret these elements,

the assessment performance was conducted by a student. This eliminated any influence or instruction of the interpretation of the piece by the instructor. The assessment for this week used a Teacher-Made Assessment Piece (Appendix G, p. 59) and the Sight Reading Rubric (Appendix B, p. 48).

　　　　Week 6, Activity 1: Recording evaluation. The developing aural skills of the ensemble were put to use in this week's first activity. The teacher recorded the students' performance of one of their prepared pieces, along with a sight reading exercise. The students then listened to the recordings and created journal entries, free-writing to evaluate the accuracy and confidence of the prepared performance and sight reading exercise. Volunteers then shared some of their evaluative observations with the rest of the ensemble.

　　　　Week 6, Activity 2: Musically complete sight reading exercises. The sight reading exercises for this week were taken from the *Jenson* method (Bauguess, 1984) and were modified to include all of the elements from the Music Adjudication Sheet (Appendix A, p. 47) and the Sight Reading Rubric (Appendix B, p. 48). The various melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, and interpretive skills the students had been improving were combined to make the exercises complete mini-pieces. The sight reading activities were designed to help the students approach each exercise and piece as a complete work, rather than tackling each element individually.

　　　　Week 6, Activity 3: Musically complete assessment. The four-part Teacher-Made Assessment Piece (Appendix G, p. 59) for this week incorporated all of the interpretive and notational elements the students had been working on. Of the assessments, this was the closest to the actual piece they will read as part of their annual competition event. The goal of this assessment was to evaluate the students' approach to each new exercise and piece as a musical whole, performing and interpreting the piece accurately and with confidence.

Phase 3, Part 1: Results

The central focus of this project was to increase the musical skills, level of confidence, and amount of experience high school choir students had with sight reading appropriate literature without the help of a piano or other assistance with pitch. The choral students were held accountable for attaining the musical skills by the local curriculum, as well as by state and national standards for music education. Previous attempts to address this problem had been generally unsuccessful. In order to increase the musical skills and sight reading confidence of the choir members, several key strategies were implemented over a six-week period. These strategies included activities to improve the students' aural skills, implementation of a sight reading system using relative solmization, and use of a weekly group performance assessment. Together, these distinct strategies comprised a complete program of sight reading within the context of the high school choral classroom.

After the six-week implementation phase, three assessment tools were used to determine the amount of change in the students' perception and performance of sight reading. In order to provide an accurate assessment of progress, the tools used for post-implementation assessment were identical to those used in the pre-implementation needs assessment. These tools also measured the level of success for the three stated objectives of this project. The first applied assessment was the Teacher-Made Sight Reading Rubric (Appendix B, p. 48), an instrument designed to show the level of musical and interpretive achievement for the performance of a sight reading piece. This assessment combined several musical categories in order to provide an accurate performance assessment of a subjective musical performance. The second data collection tool, based on the same categories as the sight reading rubric, was the Music

Adjudication Sheet (Appendix A, p. 47). An objective third party judge at the choir's annual

contest competition scored this assessment. Like the rubric used in the classroom, the assessment

was designed to evaluate a single performance of a sight reading piece. Unlike the classroom

environment, the stakes were significantly higher for this assessment, as it had a direct effect on

the overall rating received by the choir for their contest performance. The third assessment tool

was used to determine the change in students' perception of sight reading as a skill and of their

own abilities as sight readers. The Teacher-Made Perception Survey (Appendix C, p. 50) was

administered to the choir students for this purpose. Again, the intent of repeating the identical

assessment instruments was to compare the results directly with those from the same instrument

administered during the pre-implementation needs assessment.

The first objective for this project was for the high school choir to increase their overall

sight reading skills by 25%, as measured by the Teacher-Made Sight Reading Rubric (Appendix

B, p. 48). The scoring results of this assessment, listed by category and total points, are shown in

Figure 4. Also included in the results table below are the categorical and total scores from the

pre-implementation administration of the identical assessment instrument.

Figure 4: Teacher-Made Sight Reading Rubric Scores

Category	Pre-Implementation Score	Post-Implementation Score
Tone	2	4
Intonation	3	4
Balance	4	5
Rhythm	3	4
Dynamics	2	3
Musicianship	2	3
Response to Director	3	5
Other Performance Factors	3	5
Total	22	33

By making improvements in each categorical area, the choir was able to significantly increase

the total score on the performance assessment. The actual change from pre-implementation to

post-implementation was an increase of 50% in the total scores, based on the evaluation of the

sight reading performance of the choir as an ensemble. The sight reading rubric was also used

throughout the implementation as part of the assessment solution, and the results for each

category over the course of implementation are graphed in the Teacher-Made Sight Reading

Rubric Results (Appendix H, p. 65).

The second objective of this project was for the high school choir to improve their

performance assessment score in the category of sight reading by at least two points over last

year's score, as measured by the Music Adjudication Sheet (Appendix A, p. 47). Figure 5

includes the categorical and total scores from both years for comparison.

Figure 5: Music Adjudication Results

Category	2002 Score	2003 Score
Tone	4	4
Intonation	3	4
Balance	4	4
Rhythm	4	4
Dynamics	4	4
Musicianship	4	3
Response to Director	5	5
Other Performance Factors	5	5
Total	33	33

While the goal of improving the total score was not met, it is significant that the category in

which improvement was demonstrated from 2002 to 2003 was intonation. The implemented

solution incorporating relative solmization as a tool for sight reading was designed to improve

the choir's sense of pitch and intonation, and improvement in this category is duly noted.

The final objective for this project was for the choir members to increase their positive

perception of sight reading skills by at least one point on average, as measured by the Teacher-

Made Perception Survey (Appendix C, p. 50). The average post-implementation scores for each

item on the survey are reported in Figure 6. Also included in the table are the average scores

from the initial implementation of the perception survey. Complete results from the post-

implementation survey are reported in Teacher-Made Perception Survey Results (Appendix E, p.

54).

Figure 6: Average Survey Scores

Survey Item	Pre-Implementation Mean Score	Post-implementation Mean Score
1. I am able to sight read a new piece well without the piano.	2.9	3.3
2. Our choir is able to sight read well without the piano.	2.9	3.3
3. I am able to sight read a new piece well, as long as the piano plays my part.	4.0	4.1
4. Our choir is able to sight read a new piece well, as long as the piano plays all parts.	4.1	4.2
5. I would like to be a better sight reader.	4.4	4.3
6. I would like our choir to be better at sight reading.	4.4	4.3
7. Our rehearsals would be more productive if we had better sight reading skills.	3.6	3.9
8. Knowing note names is an important skill for sight reading.	3.6	3.6
9. Knowing solfege syllables (do, re, mi, etc.) is an important skill for sight reading.	3.5	3.9
10. Understanding music notation is an important skill for sight reading.	4.1	4.2
11. I am willing to spend time every day working on sight reading skills as a group.	3.5	3.6
12. If I work on becoming a better individual sight reader, the choir will benefit as a group.	3.9	4.0

The statistical goal of increasing the average score by one full point was not met. However, the

students' perception of the ability to individually and corporately sight read without the help of

the piano showed the most dramatic improvement. The scores on survey items one and two,

describing the individual's and ensemble's sight reading skills, each increased by 14%. The other

significant increase in positive perception was on survey item nine, a direct reference to the

implementation of a sight reading system incorporating relative solmization. The choir's

perception of the importance of this system increased by 11%. Overall, the post-implementation

survey indicated an increased awareness and positive perception of the importance of sight

reading skills, as well as the sight reading abilities of the individuals within the ensemble.

Implementing the solutions from this project was a means to the successful achievement

of one of the three objectives. The students showed significant improvement in all three areas,

however, and had various and repeated opportunities to gain sight reading experience. This

experience was an element of the project's overall goal that was not reflected in the objectives.

Phase 3, Part 2: Reflection

As mentioned above, only one of the proposed project objectives was successfully

achieved. The first objective, to increase the sight reading skills of the ensemble by 25% over a

six-week span, was exceeded by the results of the assessment instrument. The actual

improvement in the rubric-scored assessment was 50%. The improvements in each assessed

category are also illustrated by the results of the weekly rubric assessments incorporated in the

implementation phase. These are shown in the Teacher-Made Sight Reading Rubric Results

(Appendix H, p. 65). The graphs for each category show a general positive trend for each of the eight categories as the students progressed through the implementation phase.

The other two objectives for the project, improving the choir's sight reading score at contest by two points and the students' perception of sight reading skills by one point on average, were not achieved. This is not to say that progress was not made in these categories: As illustrated in the results section, the choir made an improvement in the category of intonation in their contest performance, showing progress in this important area of sight reading. Additionally, the students' perception of the importance of sight reading and of their own abilities as sight readers improved significantly. Why, then, were the second and third objectives not achieved? The answer is simple: the qualitative goals for these two objectives were unrealistic. The goal for the students' perception of sight reading was to increase average scores on the Teacher-Made Perception Survey (Appendix C, p. 50) by one point on average. On a scale of one to five, increasing one point is equivalent to a 20% improvement. This degree of positive change for an individual student is realistic. For the average score of the entire ensemble, however, it is a lofty goal, considering that the initial averages were in the range of three to four.

In reference to the second objective, to improve the performance assessment score of the ensemble by two points, it should be noted that the score given for the choir's contest performance was identical to that of the score the ensemble received on the post-implementation assessment for the first objective. Even when broken down into categories, the scores of these two assessments are nearly identical. This consistency speaks to the validity of the assessment instruments. For future implementations, the assessment instruments are valid and valuable, but the goals should be set with more reasonably achievable quantitative elements.

Each of the solutions implemented during this project had a positive effect on the ensemble's ability to sight read and confidence level. All three solutions also afforded the students opportunities to gain valuable experience with sight reading unfamiliar literature. The activities designed to increase the students aural skills were well-received by the students and helped increase the level of motivation for the challenging and sometimes daunting task of sight reading as an ensemble. Implementing a relative-solmization system for sight reading choral literature gave the group a set of common tools for the task at hand and facilitated communication among the group about the abstract musical concepts inherent in the sight reading process. The weekly assessment pieces gave the singers accurate and immediate feedback as to their level of achievement and their progress toward improved sight reading. In combination, the implemented strategies provided the students with the motivation, opportunities, tools, and feedback necessary to improve their sight reading as an ensemble.

Both the formative and summative assessment instruments implemented in this project, along with the sight reading assessment from the choir's contest performance, gave evidence of the positive trends in the sight reading abilities of the ensemble. They also pointed out an area that was consistently weaker than the others. In the category of musicianship, the choir was consistently rated with lower scores than the other categories, and the rate of progress in this are was slower. This is an indication that further implementations for sight reading and performance improvements should focus on the category of musicianship for this ensemble. When they have achieved improved sight reading skills for pitch and rhythm, they will be ready to move beyond the notes on the page and perform sight reading literature with more musical and interpretive sensitivity. Other changes for future implementations should include a focus on the sight reading skills of individual students within the ensemble. By improving their skills as individual

musicians, the choir members will contribute to the ability of the entire group to sight read more effectively and efficiently as an ensemble.

An element of this project that was particularly valuable and should be retained for future implementations is the cohesiveness of assessment tools. The tools used for diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments within this project were all based on the same categorical and scoring structure. This allowed for valid results throughout the project, and also facilitated valuable comparisons of results from various assessment tools. Had the structure or scoring of the assessment tools been altered between pre- and post-implementation assessments, the comparison of results would have been much more difficult and would have lacked the validity and cohesiveness which are valuable to accurate comparison.

Appendix A

Music Adjudication Sheet

IHSA
Illinois High School Association

Illinois High School Association
Music Adjudication Sheet
Vocal Organization Sightreading

School _____   Order of Appearance _____

City _____   Class _____

Selection (1) _____   Composer _____

Selection (2) _____   Composer _____

5............Superior Performance (outstanding in nearly every detail)   2 ....Fair Performance (basic weaknesses)
4............Excellent Performance (minor defects)   1 ....Poor Performance (unsatisfactory)
3............Good Performance (lacking finesse and/or interpretation)

Areas of Concern	Rating	Comments
Tone: Resonance, control, warmth, clarity, focus, consistency		
Intonation: Within ensemble, accuracy to printed pitches		
Balance: Likeness of qualities, awarness of ensemble, accompaniment		
Rhythm: Accuracy of note and rest values, duration, pulse, steadiness, meter		
Dynamics: Contrast, subtleties		
Musicianship: Interpretation, style, phrasing, tempo, emotional involvement		
Response to Director: Verbal communication, baton response, concentration interest		
Other Performance Factors: Appearance, poise, posture, general conduct, mannerisms		

Total Points: _____   Divisional Rating: _____

Rating Computation Table
36-40 points = Division I (Superior)
28-35 points = Division II (Excellent)
20-27 points = Division III (Good)
12-19 points = Division IV (Fair)
8-11 points = Division V (Poor)

_____
Adjudicator's Signature

(Use Reverse Side for Additional Comments)

Appendix B

Teacher-Made Sight Reading Rubric

Sight Reading Rubric

Category	5	4	3	2	1
Tone:	Tone is resonant, clear, supported, warm and focused	Tone is lacking in one category (resonance, clarity, support, warmth, or focus)	Tone is lacking in more than one category (resonance, clarity, support, warmth, or focus)	Tone is unsupported, breathy, and non-unified	No discernable tone quality from the group
Intonation:	Pitches are accurate and in tune across all parts	Minor pitch discrepancies in one or two voice parts	Several pitch discrepancies in all voice parts, key remains stable	Many pitch discrepancies throughout, fluctuation in key	No sense of pitch or key
Balance:	Ensemble is correctly balanced, no outstanding voices	Minor inconsistencies in ensemble's balance	One section, small group, or voice dominates the group's sound	Occasional "ensemble moments," occurring inconsistently	No sense of balance or ensemble
Rhythm:	Note and rest values are accurate and consistent	Few rhythmic errors	Several rhythmic errors	Many rhythmic errors	No correct rhythms
Dynamics:	Dynamics are evident and correct as marked	Few interpretive errors	Dynamic contrasts lack enthusiasm and intensity	Few, inconsistent dynamic contrasts	No dynamic contrast
Musicianship:	Interpretation, style, phrasing, tempo, and emotional involvement are stylistically appropriate and contribute to the overall performance	Minor inconsistencies in one area of musicianship (interp., style, phrasing, tempo, emotion)	Interpretive elements are present but lack subtlety	Interpretive elements are vague and inconsistent across the ensemble	No evident interpretive elements

Response to Director:	Evidence of productive verbal and non-verbal communication between conductor and ensemble	Attentive ensemble, not necessarily reflected in performance	Moments of inattention of loss of concentration	Ineffective communication between conductor and ensemble	No communication between conductor and ensemble
Other Performance Factors:	Appearance, poise, posture, general conduct, and mannerisms all contribute to excellent performance	One performance factor lags behind the others (appearance, poise, posture, conduct, mannerisms)	Problems in two or more areas (appearance, poise, posture, conduct, mannerisms)	Performance factors detract from performance	Conduct and lack of poise are obvious distractions

Comments: _____

_____

_____

Appendix C

Teacher-Made Perception Survey

Student Survey:
Sight Reading

Please indicate your thoughts by circling the appropriate response for each statement.

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I am able to sight read a new piece well without the piano.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Our choir is able to sight read a new piece well without the piano.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I am able to sight read a new piece well, as long as the piano plays my part.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Our choir is able to sight read a new piece well, as long as the piano plays all parts.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I would like to be a better sight reader.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I would like our choir to be better at sight reading.	1	2	3	4	5
7. Our rehearsals would be more productive if we had better sight reading skills.	1	2	3	4	5
8. Knowing note names is an important skill for sight reading.	1	2	3	4	5

9. Knowing solfege syllables (do, re, mi, etc.) is an important skill for sight reading.	1	2	3	4	5
10. Understanding music notation is an important skill for sight reading.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I am willing to spend time every day working on sight reading skills as a group.	1	2	3	4	5
12. If I work on becoming a better individual sight reader, the choir will also benefit as a group.	1	2	3	4	5

Name (optional): _____

Appendix D

Teacher-Made Colleague Survey

The following is a reproduction of the online survey created in HTML format. This

document does not display the options for item #5, which are "None," "Less than five minutes,"

"Five to ten minutes," and "More than ten minutes."

Sight Reading Survey

This survey is part of the data I will use in an action research project. Please answer all appropriate questions and submit the form. If you have any problems with or questions about the survey, please email me at feedback@reecezone.com. Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

1. Do you teach sight reading in your choral class(es)? (If not, answer only questions 1 and 8.)

   ⦿ Yes
   ⦾ No

2. If so, do you use a published sight reading method?

   ⦿ Yes
   ⦾ No

3. If so, what method do you use? (Name/Publisher)

   [_____]

4. If you do not use a published method, please describe your method of teaching sight reading.

   [_____]

5. How much time per class/rehearsal do you spend teaching sight reading?

None ▼

6. What are your reasons for teaching sight reading? Select any of the following options that apply:

    ☐ Preparation for contest

    ☐ State standards

    ☐ Improved musicianship

    ☐ More efficient rehearsals

    ☐ Other

7. If you selected "other" in the previous question, please describe your reasons for teaching sight reading:

8. What are your reasons for not teaching sight reading? (Skip this question if you do teach sight reading.)

9. Please add any relevant comments regarding teaching sight reading in the choral classroom:

Submit | Reset

Appendix E

Teacher-Made Perception Survey Results

These tables includes the survey responses from all choir students who took the Teacher-

Made Perception Survey (Appendix C, p. 50). Please refer to this survey for the wording of each

item.

Response Legend:
1 = Strongly Disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = No Opinion
4 = Agree
5 = Strongly Agree

Pre-implementation Survey Results

Survey	Item1	Item2	Item3	Item4	Item5	Item6	Item7	Item8	Item9	Item10	Item11	Item12
1	3	2	5	5	3	3	4	3	4	4	2	5
2	2	3	4	4	4	5	4	5	4	4	3	3
3	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	5
4	2	3	4	4	5	4	4	3	3	4	4	3
5	1	3	2	4	4	4	4	3	3	3	4	3
6	2	3	5	4	5	5	5	5	4	5	4	5
7	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
8	4	4	4	3	4	4	2	4	4	4	4	3
9	4	3	5	4	4	5	4	3	2	4	4	4
10	2	2	4	4	4	4	3	2	3	5	5	5
11	2	3	4	3	5	5	4	5	5	3	3	3
12	4	1	5	3	3	5	4	3	3	5	4	4
13	4	3	5	4	4	4	4	2	3	4	3	4
14	4	2	4	3	4	5	4	2	2	4	3	4
15	4	3	4	4	4	3	3	2	1	3	3	4
16	3	3	5	4	5	5	4	3	4	3	5	5
17	3	3	4	4	4	3	3	5	3	4	4	3
18	4	2	5	2	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	4
19	4	2	5	4	4	5	3	4	4	4	2	2
20	4	2	5	4	4	5	3	4	4	5	3	3
21	4	3	5	5	5	5	4	4	3	5	4	5
22	2	4	5	5	5	4	3	5	5	5	5	5

23	2	3	3	4	5	4	3	2	1	4	4	3
24	3	3	2	4	5	3	3	5	4	4	3	4
25	2	3	4	5	5	5	5	2	3	4	4	5
26	2	4	3	3	5	5	3	4	3	3	4	3
27	1	2	2	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5
28	1	4	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	3	5
29	3	2	4	5	5	3	2	3	3	4	3	4
30	1	3	4	4	5	5	5	3	3	5	4	3
31	2	2	4	4	5	5	5	4	3	4	2	3
32	3	3	4	4	5	5	5	2	3	4	2	4
33	4	2	4	4	4	4	2	4	4	4	4	4
34	2	2	5	5	4	5	2	2	4	3	3	4
35	3	4	5	5	3	4	2	3	3	3	3	4
36	1	4	4	4	3	4	2	2	3	3	3	4
37	2	4	4	4	3	4	5	2	4	5	2	5
38	4	3	5	4	4	4	3	3	3	4	3	5
39	4	4	3	5	5	5	3	4	4	4	1	4
40	4	4	5	4	5	5	4	4	4	4	1	4
41	3	4	4	4	5	5	3	5	4	3	4	4
42	3	2	4	4	5	5	4	5	5	4	4	5
43	4	3	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5
44	3	2	2	5	3	5	5	4	2	5	4	5
45	2	4	4	5	4	4	3	4	3	4	2	3
46	4	4	2	4	5	4	4	3	4	3	4	3
47	2	3	3	4	5	5	1	2	3	4	4	4
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51	4	4	5	5	4	3	3	3	3	4	4	4
52	1	3	4	4	4	4	3	4	3	3	4	3
53	3	4	3	4	4	5	4	4	5	4	4	4
54	4	2	2	4	5	5	5	5	4	5	4	5
55	1	1	4	4	5	5	3	2	3	3	4	4
56	2	1	4	4	5	5	4	3	3	5	3	2

Post-implementation Survey Results

Survey	Item1	Item2	Item3	Item4	Item5	Item6	Item7	Item8	Item9	Item10	Item11	Item12
1	2	2	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	3
2	4	4	5	5	5	5	4	5	3	4	4	5
3	4	4	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4
4	4	2	4	3	5	5	4	3	4	4	4	4
5	4	3	3	4	5	5	4	4	4	5	3	4
6	4	3	5	5	4	5	4	3	3	5	2	4

7	4	4	4	5	5	5	3	5	5	3	1	5
8	2	4	3	4	3	3	4	3	4	4	3	5
9	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
10	2	4	3	5	5	2	2	5	5	5	5	5
11	4	4	5	5	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	4
12	3	3	4	5	5	5	5	4	5	4	4	4
13	4	3	5	4	3	3	3	3	4	3	3	3
14	5	4	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
15	2	2	4	4	5	5	3	4	4	5	2	3
16	3	5	3	5	4	4	4	4	4	5	5	5
17	3	3	3	3	4	4	3	3	4	3	2	3
18	4	4	5	5	3	4	5	2	4	5	2	5
19	4	4	5	5	3	4	3	4	4	4	3	4
20	3	3	4	5	5	4	4	5	5	5	4	3
21	1	3	4	4	4	5	3	4	4	4	3	4
22	5	4	5	5	4	4	5	4	4	5	5	5
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24	3	3	4	4	5	5	5	5	4	4	3	4
25	1	3	4	4	4	4	4	3	4	3	4	3
26	3	3	4	4	3	3	2	1	1	3	3	3
27	1	4	1	1	4	2	2	1	3	2	3	2
28	4	4	5	5	5	3	3	4	4	4	3	5
29	2	2	3	4	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5
30	3	4	5	5	5	5	5	3	4	4	3	5
31	4	2	5	4	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5
32	4	3	5	5	4	5	4	3	3	3	3	4
33	4	4	3	3	4	5	4	5	3	4	5	4
34	4	2	5	4	4	4	3	2	2	4	3	4
35	4	4	5	5	3	3	4	2	3	5	3	4
36	4	1	1	4	1	4	4	1	4	4	4	1
37	4	3	5	4	5	5	4	5	4	4	5	4
38	4	3	5	4	4	4	3	2	4	4	3	4
39	2	4	4	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	4
40	4	3	5	4	5	5	4	3	3	4	3	5
41	3	4	4	5	5	4	3	3	4	4	4	4
42	2	3	4	4	5	5	4	5	5	5	4	3
43	3	5	4	5	3	4	4	3	4	4	3	5
44	3	4	4	4	4	4	5	5	4	5	4	4
45	2	2	4	4	4	4	3	2	4	4	3	4
46	5	2	5	4	3	4	4	3	3	5	3	3
47	4	3	5	4	5	5	4	4	4	5	4	3
48	3	4	3	4	4	3	3	4	4	4	4	3
49	2	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	3	5
50	2	2	4	4	5	5	4	3	2	4	4	3
51	3	3	5	5	5	5	5	2	3	4	4	4

52	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4
53	3	4	4	4	3	3	4	3	3	4	4	4
54	4	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
55	2	2	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	3

Appendix F

Implementation Plan Outline

- Week 1: Rhythm
    - Aural Skills: Rhythm pattern echoes and canons
    - Relative Solmization: Daily sight reading exercises involving rhythmic patterns
    - Assessment: Four-part rhythmic assessment
- Week 2: Melodic Relationships
    - Aural Skills: Melodic pattern echoes and canons
    - Relative Solmization: Daily sight reading exercises involving stepwise motion
    - Assessment: Four-part melodic assessment
- Week 3: Harmonic Relationships
    - Aural Skills: Question-and-answer phrase activity
    - Relative Solmization: Daily sight reading exercises involving skips and harmony
    - Assessment: Four-part harmonic assessment
- Week 4: Dynamics
    - Aural Skills: Syllable identification activity
    - Relative Solmization: Daily sight reading exercises involving notation of dynamics
    - Assessment: Four-part assessment focused on dynamic interpretation
- Week 5: Musicianship
    - Aural Skills: Text-as-phrasing activity
    - Relative Solmization: Daily sight reading exercises involving interpretive elements
    - Assessment: Four-part assessment of interpretive skills
- Week 6: Gestalt
    - Aural Skills: Self-evaluative recording activity
    - Relative Solmization: Daily sight reading exercises incorporating all required sight reading elements
    - Assessment: Four-part assessment activity incorporating all notation elements
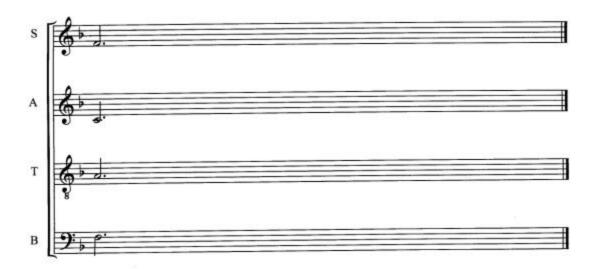
Appendix G

Teacher-Made Assessment Pieces

SR #1

Reece
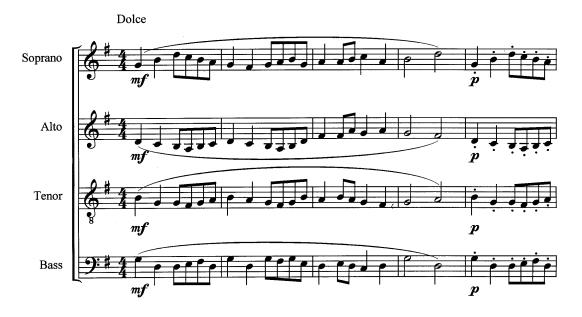
SR #2

Reece

SR #3

Reece

SR #4

Reece

SR #5

Reece

SR #6

Reece

Appendix H

Teacher-Made Sight Reading Rubric Results

The following graphs show the progression of rubric scores from the pre-implementation needs assessment through the weekly assessments during implementation and the final post-implementation assessment. Each graph represents a separate category from the Teacher-Made Sight Reading Rubric (Appendix B, p. 48).

Intonation

Balance

Rhythm

Dynamics

Musicianship

Score: Pre 2, Week 1 3, Week 2 4, Week 3 3, Week 4 4, Week 5 4, Week 6 5, Post 3

Response to Director

Score: Pre 3, Week 1 4, Week 2 4, Week 3 4, Week 4 5, Week 5 5, Week 6 5, Post 5

Other Performance Factors

Total