

A Case for Choral Repetition

(Based on Repeat after me, *As we Speak*, Forthcoming)

Choral repetition was a stalwart of foreign language classes in days of old. For many ESL and EFL instructors, the words *choral repetition* evoke memories of teachers wandering up and down the aisles, mindlessly intoning grammatical structures. “Je vais, tu vas, il va, elle va, nous allons, vous allez, ils vont, elles vont.” This is not exactly the picture of the communicative, interactive class experience our students have come to expect. As a result, many instructors automatically steer clear of integrating choral repetition because they believe that it takes valuable class time away from authentic communication activities (Prator & Wallace Robinett, 1985). “If you say ‘choral practice’ to an experienced language teacher, you will get a mixture of a frown and an embarrassed laughter in return. ‘We left that decades ago’, some will say” (Kjellin, n.d., p. 1).

However, there is some evidence that the pendulum is swinging back in favor of including more choral repetition in the classroom. Many pronunciation experts, in particular, have written about the benefit increased repetition has for our students (e.g., Gilbert, 2008, 2015; Miller & Jones, 2016).

Why should we integrate choral repetition into our lessons?

1. Choral repetition facilitates automaticity.
 - a. There is a high cognitive load associated with speaking. Students have to think about grammar, pragmatics, vocabulary, comprehension, content, and pronunciation simultaneously (Gilbert, 2008). It can be overwhelming.
 - b. Through quality choral repetition, students have a model (the teacher) they can mirror again and again until they don’t have to think consciously about the pronunciation skill on which they are focusing.
 - c. If pronunciation is automatic, it frees up students to think about other things, such as the message they want to communicate.
2. Choral repetition allows for sheltered practice.
 - a. When students are exposed to new words, they may lack the confidence to use them in conversation. They need practice to build confidence and competence.
 - b. Practicing vocabulary by saying the words aloud with the support of the group allows weaker students to rely on the strength of the group to carry their practice (Kjellin, n.d. and Gilbert, 2015).
 - c. It can be even more helpful for the teacher to both serve as a model and to also say target words and structures with the students. “The teacher prompts students to listen first and then, “Say it with me.” This is different from “listen and repeat,” because the sound of the teacher’s voice is needed to carry the chorus of student voices along” (Miller & Jones, 2016, p. 91).

3. Choral repetition boosts memory.
 - a. ESL and EFL students are at a disadvantage when it comes to the extent of their mental lexicons. “By conservative estimates, native speakers increase their vocabulary by over 1,000 words per year, at least up to their twenties. Most learners of English as a foreign language are lucky to achieve one quarter of this rate.” (Nation, 2001, p. 24)
 - b. Saying new words out loud is an essential part of remembering them. Researchers Baddeley, Gathercole and Papagno (1998) describe this part of memory as the *phonological loop*. Essentially, students need to say the new words (either out loud or subvocally) for them to be entered into their brains’ short-term storage and then, ideally, into long-term storage. Choral repetition is one way to encourage students to vocalize words so they can enter the phonological loop.
 - c. In addition, research indicates that how often learners encounter new words is more crucial to their retention than the richness of the context in which they encounter them. In other words, according to Joe (2010), it’s better for students to have multiple passes with new vocabulary, even if some of those passes are context-free, than it is for them to come across each new word just once or twice in a story. An easy way for teachers to ensure students have multiple passes by each new word is by incorporating more choral repetition into ESL and EFL lessons.

What kind of choral repetition is best?

1. In her study of success, Duckworth (2016) found that experts don’t necessarily practice more than others; they practice differently. They set specific goals focused on one narrow aspect of performance; they focus on their weaknesses; they seek feedback, and they reflect on that feedback.
2. Likewise, if choral practice is to be truly valuable, it needs to be deliberate. Gilbert (2008) refers to repetition that is conscious, focused, and critical as *quality choral repetition*.
3. Teachers need to plan choral repetition that facilitates this.

How can we make choral repetition *deliberate*?

1. Incorporate movement into choral repetition.
 - a. Adding some physical gestures to choral repetition can insert not only insert a little fun into pronunciation lessons, it can also increase the flow of oxygen to the brain. Even the mere act of standing increases one’s heartbeat slightly, which results in more blood to the brain, which activates the central nervous system to increase neural firing (Jensen, 1996).
 - b. Movement can also be an extremely useful way of helping students remember word stress and speech rhythm rules and can help instructors see when students are struggling to apply English stress patterns appropriately (Burri, Baker & Acton, 2016).

- c. There are many fun ways to integrate movement into choral repetition:
 - Gilbert (2008) advocates for using rubber bands to help students feel the stress of new words by pulling them taut on the stressed syllables and relaxing them on the reduced syllables.
 - Meyers & Holt (2001) demonstrate a technique of having students open their arms wide on the stressed syllables and bringing them into an extended clapping position in front of their bodies on the reduced syllables.
 - Noll (1999) suggests a variety of fun movements that might accompany choral repetition of vocabulary words:
 1. standing on the stressed syllables and sitting on the reduced syllables
 2. raising ones eyebrows on the stressed syllables and lowering them on the reduced syllables
 3. taking a big step on the stressed syllables and smaller steps on the reduced syllables.
 - Grant (2001) suggests having students open their hands, palm forward on the stressed syllables and closing their hands into fists on the reduced syllables.
 - Burri, Baker and Acton (2016) advocate the *Rhythm Fight Club* approach in which students punch on the stressed syllables and jab on the reduced syllables while chorally repeating.
2. Encourage students to monitor their own pronunciation during choral repetition.
 - a. Instructing students to plug their ears and whisper as they chorally repeat is an excellent way to have students hear their own pronunciation to critically evaluate it.
 - b. Teachers who bring a mirror to class can help students to become more thoughtful about their pronunciation of consonant and vowel sounds. Students who look in a mirror while chorally repeating can monitor their own mouth movements and compare them with the instructor's (Li, Varasarin & Suasin, 2014). Without the ability to critically evaluate their own mouth position, having students simply repeat after the model may end up reinforcing incorrect mouth positioning.
3. Balance choral repetition with visual support.
 - a. The sight of a word triggers its pronunciation subvocally in learners' brains (Ehri, 2002).
 - If students aren't given the chance to repeat a new word several times, they may assign the wrong sounds to the word before it is transferred to their longterm memory and, as a result, it may be improperly stored and difficult for learners to retrieve later (Woo and Price, 2015).
 - So, it is important for teachers to show the words during the choral repetition.
 1. Write them on the board.
 2. Provide students with a handout.

3. Display them in a PowerPoint slide.
4. Vary choral repetition.
 - a. Teachers can make choral repetition more fun by dividing the class into interesting groups for more varied repetition.
 - b. Consider dividing the students up:
 - by row, ii. by column, iii. by clothing items, iv. by hair color, v. by eye color, vi. by favorite ice cream flavor, vii. by number of siblings, viii. by number of family members, ix. by country, x. by continent, xi. by kinds of pets, xii. by pizza toppings, xiii. by favorite school subject, or xiv. by items in a book bag
 - c. Gilbert (2008) also recommends having students vary their voices as they repeat. Having students sound sad, angry, or excited as they say words can be fun. Or, teachers can tell students to whisper or shout words as they are being repeated for more variety.

Simply put, teachers who incorporate choral repetition into their lessons make learning easier for their students. After all, our learners are rarely studying English so they can be master gap fillers. In fact, “when people - including our learners - refer to ‘second language ability,’ their primary goal seems to be speaking. . . . Almost all of my ESL/EFL students dream of the day when they can finally say, ‘I speak English well’” (Folse, 2006, 3-4). Part of speaking well is speaking automatically and comprehensibly. Students need to repeat sounds, words, and phrases many, many times before they truly “own” them and can use them without conscious thought (Gilbert, 2008). Clearly, there is a case to be made for deliberate, *quality* choral repetition.

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